DayDreams
Knight Life

Deadbeats
Kevin Eastman
Bob Wiacek
Steve Bissette
Issue #1

DAYDREAMS & Knightmares

Mortal Ways & Miracle Plays 3
Susan M. Garrett

Back to Normal 12
Sharon S. Scott

A Noteworthy Occurrence 21
Susan M. Garrett

assignment: KNIGHT 25
Susan M. Garrett

Artwork by Ann Larimer

Penguin Press

© May 1995. Susan M. Garrett. All rights revert to contributors upon publication. *Daydreams and Knightmares* is an amateur publication not intended to infringe upon the copyrights owned by James Parriot, Tri-Star Pictures, Paragon Entertainment, or any other original copyright owners of written, movie, television, or visual material. *Susan M. Garrett, 14B Terrace Ct., Toms River, NJ 08753.*

editorial

There's a lot that can be said about *Forever Knight*. It's a series that explores the human condition in all of its facets, from the inside . . . and the outside. The nobility, the tragedy, the drama, and the comedy of mortality can be a vast well of raw material.

But there are limitations to series television (yes, even on cable). Sometimes our investigations are too whispery to make an hour of entertainment, others too far beyond the confines of a continuing series. This poses a problem to our infinite imaginations.

Which is why you're holding this zine. Some of the fiction is lighter of heart or in tone—these are the daydreams. Other pieces are dark fancies, trips into the scarier, nightmare side of the twilight zone. But they all start with the same series and travel on the wings of 'what if' in search of blue skies or thunderclouds.

For the cover and the internal art, I have the priviledge of thanking Ann Larimer, who is enduring my current bout of madness with outstanding patience and civility (it really can't last *that* much longer). She has once again done the impossible (managing creativity on a deadline from hell) and I can't thank her enough for arting for my sake.

As for the fiction--several of these pieces have seen print on the Internet FK-Fic mailing list and Sharon Scott's "Back to Normal," is my one of my favorites. I think it's both charming and delightful in it's presentation—complete and satisfying in all senses of the word. I also have the honor of printing Sharon Himmanen's "Be Careful What You Wish For," which presents a disturbing alternate version of the events of *Dark Knight II* and which has never been posted (because Sharon's a bit of a wuss about this writing thing). Two other stories that haven't been posted are part of a 'party favor' set—but more on those in the editorial on the other side of this book.

And maybe that should be addressed, too—why this zine looks like it was put together by a deranged typesetter (well, it *was*, but that's beside the point). We thought we'd make it easier for you. If you need a bit of light-hearted entertainment or cheering up, wander through a few of our *Daydreams*. But we caution you, try not to read too many *Knightmares* before bedtime . . . .

Susan M. Garrett

SusanG2522@aol.com or susang@vitinc.com

MORTAL WAYS AND MIRACLE PLAYS

By Susan M. Garrett

STARING AT the television, Nick was only dimly aware of the ringing phone. For a moment there was nothing but the wide screen, the roar of the crowd as the center forward deftly eluded a defender and the puck whizzed across the ice, toward the goalie.

The message on his answering machine kicked in and Nick held up his hand absently as if to ward off the message, attention still centered on the screen. The deafening shouts of the crowd nearly drowned out the announcer's joyful pronouncement of "He scores!"

"A hat trick," he murmured in disbelief, as the announcer echoed his words, although in more exuberant terms. Of course, it wasn't his team who had just scored their third consecutive goal in the first twenty minute period.

"—I really need your help," said the voice on the machine. "Nick, as soon as you get back—"

His mind identified the owner of the voice, and the urgency the tone implied at just about the same time. It was Myra Schanke. Nick backed away from the television screen, still watching in disbelief as the camera panned to the rink, which was covered with baseball caps.

Wonderful. A hat trick on 'Hat Day' at the rink. It would take them a half hour to clear the ice before play could resume.

Picking up the phone, he said, "Myra? This is Nick—I'm sorry, what can I do—?"

"Nick, thank God! I'm at my wit's end."

Any residual interest in the game faded at the desperation in her voice. "What's wrong?"

"Oh, it's Don—"

In the background, Nick's sensitive hearing managed to pick up the sounds of . . . well, if it had been six hundred years earlier, he would have identified the noise as two armored combatants hacking away at one another's shields with broadswords. "Myra? What's going on? What's he done?"

Then he heard Schanke's voice, from a distance. "Myra, have you seen—?"

"Hang on." Her voice was muffled, meaning that she'd covered the receiver with her hand as she called, "Don, I'm on the PHONE. Just wait a minute." Then she returned, her voice softer, almost a whisper. "He's driving me nuts. Nick, if you can't get over here, I don't know what I'm gonna do to that man."

Nick's eyes went back to the wide screen. The telecasters were now interviewing players. It would be a while before the ice was cleared and he could catch the rest of the period at Schanke's house if he had to. "It's okay, Myra. I'll be right over. But what's—?"

There was another bellow from Schanke. "Myra?!"

"Gotta go, Nick. You're a life-saver. Thanks. Bye."

The phone clicked and her voice was replaced by a dial tone. Bemused, Nick stared at the receiver in his hand, then dropped it onto the cradle. Picking up the remote, he turned off the television, then tossed the control onto the couch as he headed for the door. If he hurried, he'd might just make the rest of the first period.

Not that it mattered. Who'd ever heard of a hat trick in the first period of a play-off game?

But his mind wouldn't stay on the game, despite the fact that he'd tuned the Caddy radio to the sports station—they *were* still clearing the ice. There was a note of exasperation and desperation in Myra's voice that he'd never heard before. And that banging/clanging sound in the background?

He pulled the Caddy in front of the house. There was a light gleaming from the high windows of the garage, but Nick headed for the front door. He raised his hand to knock, but the door opened and a hand grabbed his forearm, dragging him inside and almost off his feet.

Myra's fingers dug into his right biceps. Her eyes were wide and wild as she gasped gratefully, "Thank goodness you got here! I'm about to go out of my mind." She glanced over her shoulder, toward the kitchen, then added in a hushed whisper, "If he asks, you've just stopped by, okay? If he finds out I called you he'll be furious. You know how it is."

Everything in the house appeared normal—as usual it looked lived in, but clean. There was no sign of Jenny. Still not comprehending, Nick looked down at Myra—her hair was pulled back, but wisps has escaped the clip and had fallen down around her ears and along the side of her face. "No, I *don't* know how it is," he answered, very carefully. "Why don't you tell me what—?"

He was interrupted by a loud metallic banging sound from the direction of the garage. Nick raised an eyebrow and glanced at Myra as the banging stopped, Schanke gave an unintelligible exclamation, and some furious language followed.

"Jenny's at a friend's house," she explained, her cheeks coloring slightly. "And he won't close the door—says it's too hot in there." With another sigh, she pulled Nick through the kitchen, toward the garage. "Honey," she called, "look who's stopped by!"

Nick's first thought upon seeing the interior of the garage was that a machine shop had imploded. The floor was covered with tools, various nuts, bolts, screws, and other assorted hardware. A large cardboard box had been opened to full length and was resting against the garage door windows, as if to keep prying eyes out. And Schanke was kneeling on the garage floor, wearing khaki pants and a blue and green Hawaiian shirt, a wrench in one hand and a length of pipe in the other.

He put down the pipe and groaned aloud as he struggled to his feet against the protests of his muscles. "So, partner—what brings you through this neck of the woods."

Nick was still trying to comprehend the extent of the mechanical carnage. He glanced at Schanke blankly, then let his eyes roam over the interior of the garage, trying to make sense of the bits and pieces. "I thought—you might want to watch the game. What are you doing? Building yourself a brain?"

"The game? Yeah—almost forgot." As Nick stepped away, treading carefully through the hardware, Schanke nodded. "Maybe after I'm done. Myra wanted me to get a start on putting Jenny's new bicycle together."

Nick looked up at the comment, then over to Myra, who was still standing in the doorway. "We promised her a new bike if her grades were good. School's over in a couple of days."

"And you've been putting it off," noted Nick. Spotting one of the wheels, he picked it up and turned it over in his hands.

"We've been busy. Lots of overtime, right?" When Nick raised an eyebrow, Schanke had the good grace to clear his throat. He gestured toward the mess on the floor and asked, "How hard can it be? I put my own bike together when I was a kid. And, boy, it was a real beauty!"

Replacing the wheel, he made his way over to what looked to be part of a handlebar. "Was that before or after the last ice age?"

"Real comedian this one," commented Schanke, as he turned toward his wife. "You see what I have to put up with at work?"

As Nick picked up the handlebar, two of the joined pieces came apart in his hands. Waving one toward Schanke, he asked, "How long have you been at this?"

"A couple of hours."

Carefully putting down the handlebars, Nick cast a surreptitious look at Myra—there was panic in her eyes and a plea for rescue. "Why don't I give you a hand? Not that you need it," he added, as Schanke's brow furrowed, "but if you get done quicker, maybe we could head back to the loft and watch the third period."

"On that drive-in screen you call a TV? Sure." Schanke turned to his wife. "Myra, we got a beer or two left?"

"I think we can find something," she said. "Nick? Anything for you?"

"No. Thanks." He straightened, then gave her a smile, which she matched. "Don't worry. I'll make sure it's safe to ride before I let him anywhere near the game." As Myra left, he continued searching the floor. "They give you instructions with this thing?"

"Over there." Schanke made his way through the mess, to the clear spot he'd left earlier. "Who needs 'em? They don't make much sense, anyway. I think they're in Japanese."

Nick spotted the paper and picked it up from the cement floor. Schanke was right—the instructions *were* in Japanese. But the characters were . . . odd.

Concentrating, he stared at it a moment longer. There was no diagram, no listing of parts. "This is printed *backwards*. The writing's reversed. And . . . I'm pretty sure this tells you how to put together a double-decker hibachi." Nick looked up from the paper to where Schanke has kneeling on the floor, again

trying to fit together two pieces of a wheel assembly that looked like they didn't belong on the same planet, never mind the same bicycle. "Where did you buy this?"

"Warehouse outlet. Got a great deal on it, too."

"I'll bet," answered Nick.

Schanke grinned at the tone of his voice. "Com'on, partner, how tough can it be for two of Toronto Metro's finest? You wanna hand me that wrench?"

Mentally kissing the second period of the game a not-so-fond farewell, Nick squatted down amidst the metal wreckage and gave Schanke the wrench. Picking up the handlebars again, he tried fitting the two pieces together, nodding when they slipped into place.

It *was* only a bicycle, after all. How hard could it be?

Then the pieces came apart, falling to the floor with a loud 'clang' before he could catch either of them. Schanke jumped at the sound, gave him a look, then went back to the wheel assembly.

With grim determination, Nick picked up the pieces from the floor and tried again. So what if he missed the game—it was a loss, anyway. A hat trick, in the first period?

He had a feeling it was going to be all downhill from there.

"Ow!" Nick jumped up and back, sending the second wheel assembly skittering across the concrete floor of the garage. He stuck his thumb in his mouth and glared at Schanke, muttering, "It's not supposed to bend that way."

"Yeah, but you see —" Schanke pointed to the crossbar that they'd been fitting into place. "It goes here. And we're going to have to bend it."

"Not *that*. My finger."

"Sorry," muttered Schanke.

Nick took his thumb out of his mouth and, satisfied that it wasn't beyond repair, looked down at the bits of assembled bicycle scattered about. His thumb was much better off than Jenny's bicycle, from what he could see. And she'd probably graduate college before they finished, never mind them making the third period of the hockey game.

"Looks like the Wright brothers are at it again," said Natalie's voice.

She was standing at the doorway to the kitchen, arms crossed and leaning on the molding. Her grin was maddening. "Thought I'd drop by—Myra said she had some Skin Pretty samples for me."

Nick wasn't buying the excuse for a second, especially after he caught sight of Myra's guilty expression. When Natalie wandered past him, he whispered, "She called you?"

"Said you might need some help." Her eyes widened as she took a look around the interior of the garage. "And I can see why."

"We're almost done," said Schanke stubbornly, still trying to fit together the crossbar and the wheel connector. "Another ten minutes or so."

"Looks like you've done a great job." Natalie walked through the wreckage, then picked up a twisted piece of metal. "What happened to this?"

Nick moved quickly, taking the piece from her hand. "I bent it."

She met his eyes and smiled—she didn't need him to explain that frustration had caused him to let his control over his vampiric strength slip. "So, bend it back," she whispered.

He ran his hand along the edge of the pipe and looked away. "I did."

"And?"

"I bent it again."

Placing her hands over his on the pipe, she said softly, "Still looks pretty sound. Bend it back *again*. For me."

Nick did as she asked, then released the pipe to her, adding under his breath, "I'll *buy* her a bike."

"You will *not*," hissed Natalie, so fiercely that she surprised him. But the smile was back in an instant. "Looks like you guys have everything pretty well in hand. You deserve a break. Why don't Myra and I finish up here?"

"You could still catch the last half of the game," prompted Myra.

"Third period," Nick corrected, absently. He shadowed Natalie, as she walked from piece to piece, her lips pursed. "We *can* do this, you know."

"So I see. You've done a great job so far." Coming to the handlebar assembly, she squatted down beside it.

"Nick did that," said Schanke, looking up from the crossbar that was still giving him trouble.

He was proud of that bit—it had taken him twenty minutes but he'd finally gotten it together. But no approval was forthcoming from Natalie. And she bit her lip as she looked over it. "What?" he asked anxiously.

"Oh . . . nothing." She flashed him what was meant to be a comforting smile.

"What's wrong with it?"

"Nothing. Really." As she rose, Natalie brushed past him, whispering, "It's *backwards*. It's a girl's bike, the handlebars on that model go the other way."

Nick's eyes narrowed as he stared down at the handlebar assembly. "The instructions are in Japanese," he muttered, defensively. "And backwards. They're for a hibachi."

"What about these?" Natalie picked up another piece of paper from the floor, glanced at it, then handed it to him.

English. A diagram—and that was *most* definitely a bicycle.

Nick was ready to swear the paper hadn't been there a moment ago. But when he opened his mouth, he couldn't quite get past a strangled protestation. In response, Natalie leaned on his shoulder and said softly, "Just get him out of here. Go watch the game or something, okay?"

He'd been in enough battles over the centuries to recognize a rout when he saw one. Hoping to salvage some of his dignity, he glanced at Schanke, who'd given up on the wheel assembly. His partner rose to his feet with a shrug. "We *have* pretty much finished," he said, in a lie so bold-faced that it shocked Nick. "I think we deserve a couple of cold ones and some game time."

"At *Nick's* place," pressed Myra. She crossed the floor to her husband, then grabbed his arm and started propelling him toward the door. "I packed a cooler for you with some sandwiches, chips and beer—it's on the kitchen table. If it's okay with you, Nick?"

Shaking his head, he looked at Natalie. "Yeah. I . . . guess so."

"Is she great or what?" asked Schanke, slipping his arm around his wife's waist and giving her a kiss on the cheek. "Thinks of everything."

"Just you remember to take the cooler with you," warned Myra, as they disappeared into the kitchen. "I don't want all that work to go to waste—"

Nick took a last look around the garage as Natalie grabbed his arm and started to drag him from the room. All that work—

"I *can* do this," he protested to her, quietly. "But the instructions were in Japanese . . . and backwards."

"So you said."

He stopped in the kitchen doorway and pulled her back inside the garage, his hands on her elbows, holding her in place. "You're getting a real kick out of this, aren't you?"

Natalie looked away, started to say something, then looked back at him, her smile crooked. "Yeah, I am. It's nice to know there's *something* you can't do."

"Putting together a bicycle has never been a survival skill."

"It is when you have an eight-year-old daughter."

"I don't *have* an eight-year-old daughter."

"You may. Someday."

There was something unspoken there, a remembrance of her promise to find him a way back to mortality, to a real life. After an awkward pause, Natalie looked away.

But he still felt the need to defend himself. "I put together a motorcycle." Nick glanced back at the garage interior and cleared his throat. "It's only a bicycle—"

"You want to make up for it? Eat one of Myra's sandwiches."

He winced, still staring at the various misshapen metal bicycle bits. "A *whole* sandwich?"

"A couple of bites. All right—one bite. You've had a rough evening." Reaching past him, Natalie shut off the garage light, then dragged him through the kitchen. "Just get going, so Myra and I can finish this before Jenny comes home," she said, heading for the front door.

"If you need any help—"

"We'll call," said Natalie, adding, "Promise!" when he fixed her with a suspicious gaze.

Myra was waiting at the front door. She took his hand and leaned forward to plant a kiss on his cheek. "Thanks for dropping by, Nick. Sorry to ruin your evening."

"I'm just sorry I couldn't have been of more help."

"You kept Don from driving me nuts for a hour—that was worth a fortune." Smiling, she released his hand.

Nick matched her smile, his more sheepish, then raised an eyebrow at Natalie. "Drop by when you finish," he told her. "I want to hear all the gory details."

"You *would*." She punched him in the shoulder. "Don't expect me for a while, it's going to take Myra and I some time to undo all the damage you guys did."

He froze, then half-turned back to them. "If anything's broken—"

"Go!" prompted Myra, with a laugh, pushing him away.

The door closed behind him. Still feeling slightly guilty and more than a little foolish, Nick walked to the Caddy. Schanke had ensconced himself in the passenger seat and was already working on one of the sandwiches from the cooler.

Sliding into the seat beside his partner, Nick plucked the sandwich from Schanke's hand and placed it back into the open cooler, saying, "Crumbs."

"I've got a napkin," mumbled Schanke, around a mouthful of white bread and ham. He crumbled the napkin into a ball, tossed it into the cooler, then settled back in the seat. "Geez, *you're* in a mood."

He turned the key in the ignition and looked over his shoulder, checking the empty street for traffic. "Schanke, we were totally defeated by a girl's bicycle. Doesn't that bother you at all?"

"*Defeated*?" Schanke made a noise.

At first, Nick wasn't certain whether he'd gotten a piece of ham caught in his throat and was too busy driving too check. But after a second, he realized Schanke was laughing. "What's the joke?"

"The joke," said Schanke, between wheezing, "is part of the reason you're still single. Remind me to

give you some of the ground rules before you get hitched."

"Like?"

"Like the 'honey do's'."

Nick stared at the road ahead, completely bewildered and half-tempted to turn the car around and drop Schanke and the damned ham sandwiches off on the man's front porch.

"You know . . . or maybe you don't. It's one of the things they live for—wives, that is." Sighing, Schanke leaned against the car door, head resting on his hand. "Every time you put your feet up and turn on the game, they hear you popping the tab off the beer even if they're at the other end of the house. And all of a sudden there's a half dozen things that have to be taken care of right then and there. 'Honey,'" he mimicked, "'can you do this? Honey, can you do that?'" Shaking his head, he smiled. "Takes some guys a couple years to figure out the answer."

After a moment's pause, Nick pressed, "Which *is*?"

"You become hopeless when it comes to doing *anything*." Schanke's eyes narrowed. "Now this is a trade secret, okay, so don't go spreading it around. And I'm not saying you can't screw in the occasional light bulb or unplug a drain or something. But you gotta draw the line somewhere. I use the two tool rule, myself. If it takes more than two tools, I'm outta there."

They'd reached the loft. Nick clicked the garage door opener. "You're telling me that you *wanted* to get kicked out?"

"In time for the second period. But I'll settle for third." He frowned, then glanced back at the cooler. "Never guessed Myra would call you in as backup."

Nick froze in place, letting the car roll into the garage. "You were driving her crazy," he managed, in his own defense.

"That's the goal—get 'em so nuts they throw you out."

The garage door was closing behind them. Nick hit the remote for the interior light so he wouldn't have to guide Schanke through the darkness. When Schanke headed for the door to the stairwell, he put two fingers in his mouth and whistled, then pointed toward the cooler in the back seat.

"I'm the guest," protested Schanke.

"It's *your* cooler."

Making a face, Schanke opened the rear door of the Caddy and hefted the cooler with a groan. Nick only grinned, but held the door open for him as they headed up the back stairs to the loft. "So, why'd Myra call Natalie?"

"She'd called you in—big mistake—so I guess she figured she needed more pull on her side if she was gonna kick us out." Schanke glanced back at him, over his shoulder as they went up the stairs. "She's good—Natalie is. Sounds like she's had practice."

"And you could've put that bicycle together by yourself?"

Schanke leaned the cooler against the wall as Nick unlocked the door. "Sure. It *was* only a bicycle. I figured you were playing along. Right?"

"Oh . . . yeah. Right." Nick held the door for Schanke, then headed for the remote. He flicked the switch and the wide-screen television came to life, the announcer stating that the third period was about to begin.

"What was the score at the end of the first?" asked Schanke, from the kitchen.

"Don't know. Myra called me after the hat trick—they were still clearing the ice when I headed to your place."

"A hat trick? Oh, man!" whined Schanke. He looked up hopefully, a beer tucked under his arm and a

sandwich in either hand. "Us or them?"

"Them."

"Ouch!" Schanke pressed one of the sandwiches into Nick's hands as he passed, heading for the couch. He flopped down and placed his beer on the table. "Well, we'll know in a minute. I don't have money riding on this one—Myra'd kill me, this close to payday. You?"

"No." Wincing at the sight of the beer sitting on his coasterless coffee table and the bread crumbs scattered across his living room, Nick shook his head. He picked up a few napkins that Myra had put in the cooler, then he threw one at Schanke as he moved to a chair and sat down.

"Hat trick, huh?" Sighing, Schanke popped back the metal tab on the can of beer and raised it to Nick in a mock salute. "Well, it's only a game, after all. Next time."

"Next time," he echoed. He stared down at the sandwich in his hand and took a small bite. It was like chewing sawdust. After a moment, he raised the napkin to his lips and spit out the bread and meat in disgust . . . and despair.

Natalie's comment echoed in his mind—Someday. Someday he might have an eight-year-old-daughter for whom he'd have to build a bicycle. Or a wife to drive nuts by pretending not to do household chores.

He found himself watching Schanke consume his sandwich and beer with more than a little jealousy. The man had no idea how good he had it.

The commercial had something to do with life insurance. Schanke looked over at him, then gestured toward the sandwich. "Great, huh? Nobody makes a ham sandwich like Myra. Yeah, I know, ham and bread, right? But she knows how to cut it just thin enough, right amount of mustard and mayo." Nodding, he took another bite of his sandwich. "Nobody," he mumbled, mouth full of food.

That, and the way Schanke glanced over his shoulder at the cooler in the kitchen, made Nick reconsider. Maybe Schanke *did* know how lucky he was. Happiness seemed a one-in-a-million shot in the mortal world, but Schanke had found some measure of it with his job and family. And if his luck continued, he'd never know what it was like to be exiled from the sunlight, from family, from happiness.

The third period was announced, but Nick stared blankly at the screen. No matter what Natalie said, 'someday' wasn't an option. Mortality was a dream, an impossibility, a miracle. And in this modern world of science, miracles didn't happen.

"What?" he asked, sitting upright, suddenly realizing that Schanke had shouted something.

"Can—you—believe—it?" repeated Schanke, pronouncing each word carefully, as he pointed toward the screen. "Not one hat trick, two. *Two*!" His beer spilled as he leaned forward, amazed, but he didn't seem to notice. "We pulled off a hat trick in the second period. They're only ahead by a goal."

Nick watched the replay in equal amazement, the three goals shot by the same player from the first period matched by the three goals shot by a player from the opposing team during the second period.

It was unprecedented.

It was astounding.

It was a—

"Miracle," murmured Schanke, his beer forgotten, the sandwich abandoned on the table. He peeled his gaze from the screen for a minute, a stupid grin pasted across his face as he glanced at Nick. "Man-oh-man, it's a miracle! Remind me, I owe Nat—her timing was perfect. I would've *killed* myself if I'd missed this third period."

Nick wasn't listening. Like Schanke said, it was just a game. He'd seen enough versions of games over the centuries to become bored with most of them, but not all. There was always a chance that something, anything, might happen. And that's why he continued to watch, long after the rule-makers

had passed into memory. There was always something new to try, some new goal to shoot for. Because miracles did, occasionally, happen.

Even in the modern world.

"Can you believe this?" repeated Schanke, eyes wide.

"I can," said Nick, so softly that he knew Schanke couldn't hear him. "I do."

Then he took another bite of the ham sandwich.

BACK TO NORMAL

By Sharon S. Scott

"Detective Knight, I want you and Schanke down there, now."

"But Captain, I've got paperwork stacked up a foot high on my desk . . . ."

"No buts. Get on it."

"Yes, Captain." He turned away from her office door, smiled at the face Dedrick made at him, and walked to his desk. He sighed, then pitched the stack of papers in his hand onto the pile already on his desk and went in search of Schanke.

And found him, as was usual lately, in the locker room, watching the Jays on a tiny television set he had smuggled in.

"Schank, hop to it. We've got a body."

Schanke's eyes were glued to the images flickering on the screen. "Yeah, yeah, just a minute. Two on base, and strike two . . . ."

"Schanke, duty calls. And we got it. Move it."

"Oh man, I gotta see this . . . . Yeah! Strike three! He's out!" Schanke switched the TV off, did a little dance of joy, and held his hand out to Larson. "Pay up. Can I call 'em, or what?"

Larson groaned, but pulled out his wallet and handed over a twenty dollar bill. The dancing policeman waved the bill in his face before stuffing

it in his pocket.

"Admit it, man, I got the knack—and it's a gift, ya know. Some day you're gonna learn that I know what I'm talkin' about."

Larson gave Knight a disgusted look and headed out of the locker room.

"You know you're going to get caught betting sooner or later. And you know Cohen isn't going to be happy about it."

"What she doesn't know won't hurt her. Besides, how's she gonna find out? This is the one place we're safe from her."

Knight frowned. "I wouldn't count on it. Somehow I don't think a sign saying 'Men's Locker Room' is going to keep her out if she decides she wants in."

"Yeah, you're probably right. She's a tough old broad."

Nick sat down on the bench and stared at his partner. "A broad? You're calling Captain Cohen a broad? You do like to live dangerously, don't you?"

"Yeah, well, she's been on my butt lately. What's her problem anyway? Is she going through the change?"

Nick stood up, took his keys out of his pocket, and moved towards the door. "Could it possibly be that she knows you think she's a tough old broad?"

"Maybe. So, what's up?"

"A body. Throat slashed."

"Oh, jeez, thanks, Knight."

"Hey, I tried to get out of it. Everybody disappeared as soon as the words 'throat slashed' came up."

"Wonderful. Just what we needed right before lunch time." They headed out of the building and to the Caddy.

"Hey, Nick, we got time for something to eat on the way?"

"Afraid not. Captain said get right on it."

Schanke got in the car and slammed the door a lot harder than necessary. "Damn, and I just won lunch money. Well, when we get done, then? I'm starving."

"Okay. What new gastronomic delight is in store for me today?"

"Oh, I don't know—sushi? Man oh man, I'm happy you're off that peculiar diet you were on—I hate eating alone."

"No, Schanke. No sushi. Read my lips. No sushi. I don't eat raw fish."

"It's good for you. Lots of protein."

"Lots of parasites, also. No. Absolutely not."

"Okay. How about shrimp and oysters, then? There's a great oyster bar down by the harbor."

Nick pulled the Caddy out onto the street. "Yeah, well, if I keep this up, I'm going to have to start working out at the gym or something. Between you and Myra and Nat, I've probably gained 10 pounds."

"Don't worry about it until you can't button your pants anymore. *Then* it's time to worry about dieting. Or you could just buy a larger size and quit worrying about it at all."

"Now that's a really intelligent solution to the problem."

"I didn't claim it was intelligent—but it works. Buy clothes that are too big and everybody'll ask if you've lost weight. Works every time."

Nick glanced over at his partner, then drove on.

When they arrived at the scene, the body had been covered with a sheet. Nick walked over to it, lifted the sheet, and noted the large amount of blood around the body. Thank God that didn't make him hungry any longer.

"How long ago?" He dropped the sheet and turned to Grace.

"Not long. Couple of hours at the most. Throat cut, defensive wounds on her hands. No ID."

"Great. Just what we needed."

Schanke walked up and started to lift the sheet. Grace nodded to him and said, "I wouldn't do that if I were you."

"What's that supposed to mean? You think I haven't ever seen a stiff before?" He lifted the sheet and then dropped it as quickly as possible. "Doesn't do much for your appetite, I'll grant you that."

"I warned you, Schanke." She turned to Nick. "And somebody should have warned *you* about wearing sun block at the beach. That's some sunburn." She touched his face with one finger.

"Ow, don't do that. I was so busy slathering the stuff on the kids and watching to make sure they didn't drown themselves, that I forgot to put any on myself."

"Things have certainly changed for you, haven't they? The beach, kids, the day shift."

"Yeah, it's a whole new world. Nat's treatments for hematologicopapsia seems to have worked." He was still trying to explain that one, and to his great relief, Grace didn't comment.

He turned away at the sound of Schanke's yell.

"Hey, Nick, get over here!"

"Sorry, Grace, gotta go."

"Listen, you tell Nat I miss her since she got promoted. Tell her to call me, okay?"

Schanke yelled for him again.

"Will do." He kissed her cheek and ran towards the sound of Schanke's voice.

When he arrived at the warehouse door, Schanke had gone inside. He had donned gloves, and was gingerly picking up a knife with blood on the blade. "Look at this, will ya? Jeez, the perp didn't even try to hide this stuff. It's just laying here."

Suddenly Schanke stiffened and looked up. "You hear that?" he asked in a whisper.

"No. What and where?"

"I keep forgetting you don't have supersonic hearing anymore. Up there. Second floor. To the right. Sounds like somebody moving around and trying to be quiet about it."

"Okay, I'll go check it out. Give me some cover." Schanke nodded as Knight started cautiously up the stairs, gun drawn. When he reached the top, he looked into the first room, shook his head at Schanke, then tried the next doorway. Nodding to Schanke, he yelled, "Metro Police, come on out." When there was no response, he went in.

A shot rang out, and a man came barreling out the door, knocking Knight over in the process. Schanke yelled, "Police! Stop right there!" as the man ran down the stairs. Knight got up, and in an attempt to cut the perp off, leapt over the balcony railing and landed hard. Schanke chased the fleeing figure and caught up with him just outside the building. He hollered for backup as he cuffed the perp, and when it arrived, started back into the building to check on Knight.

And found him, on his back, on the floor.

"What's wrong? He didn't shoot you, did he?"

Nick sighed and then winced. "No, Schank, he didn't have a gun, remember? *I'm* the one who had the gun."

"Yeah, right. So why are you just laying there?"

"I think I did something to my back. It hurts like hell."

"So you want me to call for the paramedics?"

"No, just help me up."

The attempt was a miserable failure. "Okay, call the paramedics."

"Nick, take it easy. Let the nurse help you into the car."

"Okay. It hurts too much to do it myself. I'm putty in your hands."

Nat and the nurse maneuvered him into the front seat, and the nurse took the wheelchair back into the emergency room.

"Now, are we ready?" She got a careful nod from Nick, and whoops from the back seat. Nick winced, and Nat laughed. "I promised them we'd stop for banana splits on the way home from school. That was before I got the call from Don about you."

"Banana splits are okay with me, as long as I don't have to get out of the car to get them." He tried to look at the kids when they started giggling, but gave it up when his back muscles screamed at him. "What's so funny?"

Janny managed to stop giggling long enough to get out, "Oh, Dad, you look funny. Like Wile E. Coyote." She collapsed into giggles again.

"I look funny, do I? Yeah, Dad's a really funny guy today. Glad I could entertain you."

Nat started the car and pulled out of the hospital parking lot. "I'll take it slow and easy, but I did promise them."

"It's okay. Just one question—why do I look like Wile E. Coyote?"

Nat looked over at him and smiled. "Oh, I don't know. Maybe because you're all stiff, like a board? Like Wile E. Coyote after he falls off a cliff? Does this ring any bells?"

"Yeah, I get it now. My daughter thinks I'm a cartoon character."

"You know how easily entertained kids are."

"Some more easily than others, apparently." He bit his lip as the Caddy hit a larger-than-usual pothole.

"Sorry. I'll try not to do that again. We're almost there."

"Good."

Another couple of blocks down the street, she pulled into the parking lot of the Frozen North Ice Cream Emporium. The kids piled out of the back seat and ran shrieking into the building. "I want all chocolate and no vanilla! Vanilla is for wimps!" "No, it's not!" "Yes it is! You're a wimp!" "No I'm not!" "Yes, you are!" "Girls are wimps!" "No, boys are wimps!" "I'm gonna get *two* bananas and you're only gonna get one!" "No I'm not!" "Yes you are!"

Nat sat behind the wheel and watched them. "Did we ever have that much energy?"

Nick smiled. "I don't think so. Now go, wife, and get me a sundae with all chocolate and no vanilla. I've just heard from an impeccable source that vanilla is for wimps."

"Yes, master. Will do, master. One non-wimp sundae, to go." She kissed him on the cheek and got out of the car, dashing to catch up with the kids.

They were back in a few minutes, the kids carrying their treasure in their hands, Nick and Nat's in a bag.

"Now don't open the tops on those until we get home. You know how your Dad is about spills in the car."

Janny answered, "Yes, ma'am," and proceeded to poke Richie in the ribs. He yelled, "Wimp!" at her and poked her back.

"Okay, you two. Quit fighting. And be careful of that ice cream." They looked momentarily abashed, so she started the car and pulled out of the lot. They almost got home before warfare broke out again.

"Am not!" "Are too!" "Wimp, wimp, wimp!" "Am not!" "Are too!" "Mom, he hit me!" "No I didn't!" "Yes he did!" "Tattletale!" "Am not!" "Are too!"

"Both of you stop it. I can't drive and corral you two at the same time." As she pulled into the garage, the kids began to fight in earnest. "Baby!" "Am not!" "Are too!" "You're a baby, you're a baby, you're a baby!" "No I'm not!" "Yes you are!" "You started it!" "No I didn't!" "Yes you did!"

Nick's head was pounding, his back hurt, and now his nerves were being shattered. "*Stop* it!"

They knew it took a lot to make Dad yell, so they hushed, but continued the battle using physical means. Richie pushed Janny down in the floorboard, Janny kicked Richie, Richie kicked her back, and by the time Nat had stopped the car, Richie's banana split was spread all over the back seat and Janny's had hit the ceiling and was dripping into an unappetizing puddle on the carpet.

There was a sudden silence in the car. Nat was trying to group her resources to deal with the wrath Nick was sure to visit upon the children when he saw what they'd done; the kids were staring at the destruction they'd wrought; and Nick was attempting to get the strength to handle the torture of getting out of the car, up the stairs, and into bed.

Nat took a deep breath, undid her seat belt, pulled the keys out of the ignition, and took a deep breath. "Richard, Janette, listen very carefully to me. Are you listening?"

"Yes, Mom." "It's his fault!" "No, it's not!" "He kicked me first!" "No, I didn't!" "Yes you . . . ."

"BE QUIET, BOTH OF YOU! LISTEN TO YOUR MOTHER!"

They knew they'd better shut up when Dad used that tone of voice. They shut up.

"Thank you, Nick. I think I can handle this."

"You're welcome."

"Now, children. You will not say a word. You will get out of the car, unlock the door, go inside, get sponges and towels, and you will come back out here and clean up the mess you made."

Nick tried to turn his head to see what they'd done, but thought better of it when pain surged up and down his spine. "What did they do?"

"Believe me, Nick, you *don't* want to know. Now, you two get busy. DO YOU HEAR ME?"

"Yes, ma'am." Nat handed Richie the keys and the kids got out of the car and very quietly started toward the door.

"Okay, now it's your turn. Stay still till I get over there to help you out of the car."

"Yes, ma'am."

Nick awoke sweating from a dream of snarls, glistening fangs, and blood trickling down LaCroix's chin, mixed with visions of giant sticky spots on the seats of the Caddy. He wiped his forehead and was surprised, still, not to see blood on his hand. He looked over to Nat's side of the bed, which was empty, and then heard the sound of water running in the bathroom. Without thinking, he tried to get up out of bed, but fell back with a groan. He tried again, and managed to get up this time. Bent over and limping, holding on to the furniture as he went, he managed to make it to the bathroom door.

"Nat!"

She turned off the shower and yelled, "Nick? What are you doing out of bed?"

"Nat, my back really hurts. Where'd you put the pain pills?"

"Hang on a minute. I'll find them for you."

"Just tell me where they are. I can take a couple of pills all by myself."

"Sorry. They're downstairs on the kitchen counter. I forgot to bring them up. Yell at Richie to bring them up to you."

"Okay." He started towards the bedroom door to yell at Richie and then had a better idea. The flip-phone he used on the job was in his coat pocket, so he hobbled over to the chair where Nat had thrown the coat, pulled out the phone, and dialed their home number.

Janny answered. "Knight resdence."

"Hi, Pumpkin, it's Dad. Would you look on the kitchen counter and bring me the bottle of pills in Mom's purse?"

"Daddy? Where are you?"

"I'm upstairs."

"You called from upstairs? You're weird, Daddy."

"I know. Your mom tells me that all the time. Just bring me the pill bottle, okay?"

"Okay, Daddy. I love you."

"I love you, too. Bye."

"Bye, Daddy."

He set the phone down and smiled. Janny called him 'Daddy' only when she was sleepy, sick, or in trouble. He didn't have to guess which it was this time.

In a few minutes she knocked on the bedroom door. "Daddy?"

"Come in."

She opened the door, peeked in, and grinned when she saw him sitting up in bed smiling at her. She walked very carefully across the room, carrying her favorite plastic mug with a top on it. It had fat purple dinosaurs on it.

"Thank you very much. You saved your mom a trip up and down the stairs."

She smiled from ear to ear, and jumped up on the bed beside him. He stifled a groan as she reached over to give him a kiss on the cheek and made the bed move.

"What's that for?"

"Just 'cause." She snuggled up against him and he kissed the top of her head. "Did you remember the pills, too?"

"They're in my pocket. Do you need one?" She reached into her pocket and pulled out a hair ribbon, a Polly Pocket, and the bottle of pills.

"I need *two*, I think." He tried to get the top off the bottle and failed. He looked over at the child sitting next to him, and handed it back to her. She got the top off in a matter of seconds and handed bottle and top back to him.

"Thanks." He swallowed two of the pills with what he had thought was water. It turned out to be grape Kool-Aid.

"What happened to you, Daddy? Did you get sick at work?"

"Well, I tried to jump off something that was too high, and I fell down and hurt my back."

"Does it hurt *bad*?"

"Yes, it does, but it's better now, thanks to you. What's your brother up to?

"We're playing Nintendo. I'm winning. Are you okay now? 'Cause I need to go finish winning."

"I'm okay now. Go on and finish your game. Bye." He kissed the top of her head again, and she bounded out of the room, then turned and came back.

"I'm really, really sorry for messing up your car. We cleaned it up really good."

"It's okay. I'm really, really sorry I yelled at you."

"Okay. Bye."

He heard her running down the stairs and started to yell at her to be careful, then thought he'd done enough yelling for one day, and didn't.

He heard Nat sigh. She was standing in the bathroom door, in a towel.

"I'm really, really sorry they messed up your car, too. But kids spill things. It's no big deal."

"Yeah, that's what you told me about changing diapers, too."

She couldn't control her laughter at that statement and at the look on his face.

"Wasn't that fun? But now they're past that stage. Now they just spill ice cream in the car."

"It's probably going to leave a stain."

"Quit worrying about it, will you? I'll take it tomorrow and get it cleaned at the car wash. They can get almost anything out."

"Are you sure you'll have time tomorrow? Since you're such an important person now?" All of a sudden he wasn't smiling anymore.

Neither was she. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means you're never home anymore, since you got promoted to Chief Medical Examiner. The kids are beginning to think the maid is their mother. Why can't somebody else deal with these things?"

She stared at him, a flush beginning at the base of her throat and moving up. "You son of a . . . No, I won't insult your mother. *I'm* never here? When's the last time you spent an entire weekend with the family? How many times have you been called in when you were supposed to be off-duty in the last month? Why can't *you* let someone else deal with these things?" She stomped over to the closet and took out a warm-up suit, stomped into the bathroom, and slammed the door.

A few minutes later, she stomped out of the bathroom and moved to the dresser to put her watch and earrings back on.

"I'm sorry, Nat. We're both in the wrong. Neither of us is here enough. We both love our jobs. We both think we're helping to make things better. We're contributing."

She turned to face him. "You're right. I think we just haven't been willing to admit it. We both need to make some changes, spend more time with the kids. But Richie needs braces, and Janny needs to have her adenoids removed, and all that costs money. Oh, and that reminds me, I got a note from Janny's teacher—she keeps talking during story time. And the kids were playing with the shutters again, and broke one of them. The VCR has quit again. The sink in the kids' bathroom is stopped up. And my car is falling apart. And we've got to decide about that house in the country."

"Nat, none of that is important. We can get Janny's adenoids removed, and have braces put on Richie's teeth, and call a plumber, and replace the shutters with drapes. We've got money. Money's the least of our problems. If anybody knew just how much money we *do* have . . . "

"It'd be kind of like Schanke finding out you were a vampire?"

He grinned. "Yeah, something like that. We'd be in trouble with the tax people, for sure. Even though we did give a major amount of the cash stash to charity."

She came and sat on the bed next to him. "I still can't believe Don never figured out just what you were. All the signs were there."

"I think he knew, deep down. He just wouldn't ever admit it to himself."

"So, how are you feeling? Did one of the kids bring you the pain pills?"

"Janny did. And something to wash them down with. You don't want to know *what*. Any idea how long it'll take to get over this and back to normal?"

"Nick, you probably won't ever be 'back to normal,' whatever that is. The doctor told me that you've got several of the symptoms of arthritis. So your back problems will more than likely flare up again, even when you get over this episode."

"Arthritis? I don't have arthritis. Old people get arthritis."

"Yeah, well, just how old are you now? 808? 809? It's a part of aging. It's one of the liabilities of being human."

"Why me?"

"Why not you? You've abused your body for years—nay, bold knight, centuries—flying, leaping off tall buildings, crashing through windows, breaking down doors, rescuing fair maidens, getting stabbed and shot, and run through with mufflers and assorted other objects. What do you expect? You're mortal now, and mortals age, and their bodies wear out. They get stiff joints, and headaches, and poor digestion, and corns on their feet. And have back trouble. It's just age catching up with you. You've got to remember that you can be hurt now, and that you're subject to all the mortal aches and pains and diseases."

"That's a lovely picture of what I've got to look forward to. Thanks a lot."

"You're welcome. It's not going to happen immediately. You've just got to slow down, take it easy. You'll be okay again in a couple of days."

"But there's no cure for the arthritis?" He looked like a hurt child.

She tried to remember that they had both lost hope that he'd ever become mortal again, until that mysterious virus had spread through the vampire community, 'curing' them all of their vampirism. They'd both seen that as a miracle. Maybe he thought there would be another miracle cure for the problems of aging.

"No, there's no cure yet. You don't heal at the speed of light anymore. That's why I keep telling you to be careful."

"I know, I know. But I forget. It's hard to get used to not being able to do the things I used to be able to do."

She smiled at him, then wearily got up.

"Where are you going?"

"Take another nap. I've got to go feed the kids and then get them bathed and to bed. I'll be back."

When she returned, an hour and a half later, he was asleep. He looked like a choir boy when he slept. A choir boy with a few wrinkles and some gray hair, but a choir boy none the less. She padded to the closet, removed and hung up her clothes, and changed into a nightshirt. She looked up at a sound from the direction of the bed.

"What?"

"Just appreciating the view."

"Even if you're in no shape to do anything about it?"

"Even so."

She got into bed beside him, hesitating before laying her head on his shoulder. "Is it okay?"

"More than okay. I'd be upset if you didn't. Remember what I said about old habits dying hard? We've been married seven years. You're an old habit."

"I suppose the sentiment is real, however poorly worded."

"Yeah, well. You know what I mean." She kissed him, then fit her head back into the curve of his

shoulder. "I've been laying here thinking about the last eight years. The virus. All of us being brought back across. Finally being able to tell you how I felt about you, *and* doing something about it, without fear of killing you. The wonder of our children. It's awesome, you know? In the original sense of the word. I'm filled with awe about us, about our children, about . . . life."

"LaCroix certainly didn't feel the same way about coming back over. Is he still funding that research to figure out a way to become a vampire again?"

"Yeah. And spending a goodly portion of his money in the attempt. I talked to him on the phone yesterday—he's flying off to Egypt to investigate the secrets of the Pharaohs and mummies, or some such nonsense."

"Oh well, it keeps him busy. He's not over here pestering us all the time, boring the kids silly with all that talk about the good old days. They think he's a pompous old windbag, and don't believe a word he says. Every time he starts one of those interminable stories, their eyes glaze over."

"Nobody would believe it if they hadn't lived through it, would they?"

"Probably not. And it really is weird thinking there are *no* vampires left anywhere on the face of the earth." She looked up at him to see his reaction. Sadness was there, as well as pain. She always knew when he was thinking of Janette. No one knew what had happened to her. No one had heard from her since the day after the change. He mourned for her, still.

"Maybe when those of us who actually were vampires die of old age, nobody'll believe we ever existed. We'll be relegated to the ranks of myth, like trolls, or the little green men from Mars."

"Maybe you should write your memoirs. Put it down on paper- -"this is the way it was." Or keep a computer diary, like that kid on that old television series. What was his name? Doogie something. What a stupid name. And a stupid premise for a series. Who's going to let a 16-year old operate on them?"

He smiled. "The same people who believed in vampires? You know, it's very strange, but those centuries are beginning to get a little blurry in my mind. I've been trying to remember Henry VIII's equerry's name, and can't. It's just on the tip of my tongue . . . ."

"It's age, Nick. It does weird things. Memories fade, bad and good."

He was very quiet for a few minutes. "You know what I miss most?"

"Your mind?" Maybe that would put a smile on his face again.

It did.

"No, not my mind. Flying. I miss flying. I forget sometimes that I can't. I get poised for a take-off . . . and then . . . nothing. And I feel like a fool."

"I'll bet you look it, too."

"Nat, here I am, pouring out my guts to you, and you're making wisecracks. Why, I oughta . . . ."

"Kiss me, right?"

"Right."

A NOTEWORTHY OCCURRENCE

By Susan M. Garrett

"Nice job!" commented Natalie, as she wrapped the gauze lightly around his elbow and upper arm. "A joint, too, no less. Bend—"

Nick bent his elbow at her command, wincing slightly. "How bad is it?"

"Anyone else, I'd say they'd be out for at least half a week and have to give up their career as a right handed hitter. You?" Natalie taped the edge of the gauze in place and stepped back, admiring her handiwork. "You'll be ready for a home run in another three, maybe four hours. The next time you chase somebody into a construction site, watch out for free-floating steel beams, okay?"

"Never saw it coming. But I'll take your advice." Carefully, Nick rolled down what was left of his torn and bloodied shirt over the gauze, then examined the sliced sleeve of his leather jacket.

"You'd better drop by the loft and change that," warned Natalie, as she walked back to the sink to wash her hands. "I don't think Schanke's going to miss it. And you're *very* lucky he was on the other side of the site when it happened."

"Yeah." Still toying with the ruined sleeve, Nick slipped off the counter and to the floor. "The last

thing I need is a trip to the emergency room."

"Which is what you're going to get if you leave here one more time without *that*."

Nick followed Natalie's glance toward the brown paper bag on her desk—yet another version of the protein drink she'd been trying to foist on him for the past three days. The last one had been such a dismal failure; he made a face, the memory of the taste still lingering.

But Natalie turned from the sink, catching his look as she dried her hands. "Okay, so maybe the last one wasn't any good—"

"Any *good*?" He shook his head. "Nat, that was pure poison. I've tasted moonshine that could strip paint off metal and it was better than that stuff. You want to get rid of me, send a note to Stonetree certifying me fit for day shift—it'll be quicker and a lot less painful."

She lightly slapped his wounded arm as she passed, heading for the filing cabinet. "That's next on the agenda."

Nick froze. "You're not serious?"

"Oh, I'm not talking day shift, but it wouldn't hurt for you to go out in the sunlight now and again—and I'm not talking about the emergency double shifts you get called on once in a blue moon," she added quickly, before he could protest. "No trips to the lake or anything. Go to the mall, or the symphony, or even a movie. Just . . . get out of the loft."

Nick walked over and leaned on the filing cabinet. "Nat, I *sleep* during the day."

"Yeah, right. Like if you were mortal you *wouldn't* look like a raccoon." When he looked away, acknowledging his occasional bouts with insomnia, she slammed the filing cabinet drawer shut, to regain his attention.

"If I get caught—there goes my alibi for a permanent night shift schedule."

"So, I'll write you a note." When he smiled and shook his head in disbelief, she added, "All I'm saying is, stop wasting time. Do something *constructive*."

Nick held up his arm, the gauze visible beneath his torn jacket sleeve. "Tried that this evening. Didn't work. And speaking of which—" He glanced up at the clock. "Time to get back. Thanks for the patch up."

"Just call me Dr. Frankenstein."

He ran out the door and into the outer office, barely catching Natalie's muffled oath as she discovered he'd intentionally left the protein drink on her desk again. Just in case, Nick took the elevator down to the street level and the back door out into the parking lot, knowing that she'd never catch up to him. He was in no mood to face the latest version of the vile concoction she'd created to replace the blood he needed to survive.

But every time Nick turned the wheel of his car and the gauze rubbed against the inside of his sleeve, he was reminded of just how much effort Natalie was investing in *his* quest for mortality. From sporadic patch-ups and extrication of stray bullets, to the hours of testing and research that she did on her own time . . . and, unlike him, she didn't have all that much time to spare. He was damned lucky his attitude hadn't caused her to give up on him.

The taste of the protein drink shouldn't be all that important, although—Nick frowned again as he pulled his car up to the loft—it *was* pretty wretched stuff. The least he could do was try to stick with the

program. Who cared *what* it tasted like, if it helped bring him back across?

He was late. Nick ran upstairs, took a moment to peel off his blood spattered leather jacket and shirt without ripping off the dressing Natalie had applied, and found a shirt with suitably loose sleeves and another jacket. He was on his way back down the stairs at a run, when his steps slowed.

It was the blood, that siren call from the refrigerator. It's what his body needed at the moment, what he *craved*, to compensate for the jagged steel that had sliced open his elbow and arm. The blood would help him heal, make him strong, make him feel alive.

But that was a cheat. Because he wasn't *alive*.

Turning his head, Nick ran down the rest of the steps and to the door of the loft, relaxing only when he reached the elevator. Natalie said it was the blood that kept him from coming back across. If it meant he had to put up with a little discomfort from an occasional wound, fine. And if it also meant that he'd have to try every protein concoction she came up with until they found one that worked . . . well, not *fine*, but he'd live with it. Especially if it meant that he'd end up living, instead of this twilight half-life in which he'd existed for so many centuries.

If he hadn't been so late back to work, he would've stopped back at the Coroner's Office to apologize and pick up the drink. As it was, he pushed the speed limit to get back to the station, making his first priority a phone call to Natalie.

Schanke was at the main desk when he arrived. "Where the hell have *you* been? I head back to my car, find the perp cuffed in the back seat, covered in blood. And it isn't *his*?"

"Scraped my elbow," said Nick quickly, shrugging out of his coat, and wincing as he forgot about the bandage—he'd add another couple of hours to Natalie's healing estimate, since he'd managed to resist the call of the blood. He headed toward his desk, Schanke dogging his heels. "Nothing serious, but one of those scrapes that bleed like crazy."

"And Mr. fashion-plate didn't want to get his clothes messed up?" Shaking his head, Schanke perched himself on his own desk. "All I hear over the radio is you've put yourself off-call for a coffee break." He sighed, reached behind him and picked up a folder. "I walked him through booking. So you do the paper trail."

"Deal." Nick took the folder, sat down at his desk, his hand reaching for the phone—and stopped. Instead, he picked up the brown paper bag that sat neatly in the center of his blotter.

"Messenger from the Coroner's Office brought that over," noted Schanke. "You got some clues you're not telling me about?"

"No." Nick opened the bag. Sure enough, the protein drink container was inside. "It's . . . lunch," he explained, reaching inside the bag and steeling himself for the first sip of the dreadful drink.

The container seemed awfully light. Suspicious, he lifted the cap and peered inside.

It was empty.

"Light lunch," commented Schanke.

"Yeah." A sudden dread stole through him. Was Natalie telling him that this was the last straw? Was she finally giving up on him?

But there was something in the cup—his fingers couldn't quite reach it at the bottom. Nick tipped the cup over and a folded white slip of paper fell onto his desk. Schanke reached for it, but he was faster,

picking it up and turning away.

Nick unfolded the piece of paper. It was on letter head from the Coroner's Office, in Natalie's handwriting, and dated that evening.

To Whom it may concern,

Please excuse Detective Nick Knight from all day shifts until such time as you are otherwise notified, as he has a tendency to burn up in sunlight. Please note that this condition is only temporary.

Dr. Natalie Lambert, M.E.

"What is that, a promissory lunch?" asked Schanke.

"A promise—of sorts," answered Nick. Smiling, he folded the note and placed it inside his jacket pocket, away from Schanke's curious eyes. "And, a reminder." He looked around the office, then spotted the newspaper behind Schanke. Snapping his fingers, he gestured toward the newspaper with one hand, picking up the phone with the other.

After a confused pause, Schanke handed over the paper. Nick dialed the Coroner's Office extension, while flipping to the entertainment section of the paper. He scanned the listings quickly, looking for something . . . appropriate.

"Forensics?"

"Hi—Grace? This is Detective Knight. Could you put me through to Nat, please?"

"Yeah, sure—hang on a sec."

Nick ran his finger down the listings, shaking his head, nothing seemed—ah, there it was! He heard the extension buzz, then Natalie picked up.

"Forensics—Dr. Lambert speak—"

"Nat?"

There was a brief pause. Then, she chuckled. "Nick. I guess the messenger got there."

"He did. You're right. I'm sorry." He met Schanke's wide eyes over the desk and turned away, lowering his voice. "Look, I owe you. And I've been thinking about what you said. But I'm not too hot on soloing, first time out. So, how about a movie?"

There was another pause. "You mean, a *matinee*?"

"Yeah. Something like that. I'll even spring for the popcorn."

"At those prices, you'd better. So, what's playing?"

He turned, noted Schanke's intensely disinterested interest, and glanced down at the paper again. "There's a classic theater downtown, they're running a series of spaghetti westerns. And there's one I've never seen before . . . 'Blood in the Sun'?"

He half expected her to hang up on him.

She didn't.

assignment: KNIGHT

By Susan M. Garrett

Nick looked down at the paperwork on his desktop, then up at the clock. It was almost seven. Almost time. Why he'd ever agreed to do this was beyond him.

No, he knew why he'd agreed to do this. He owed Schanke. And if he said that it hadn't touched him to be asked to carry out this very special assignment, he'd have been lying.

A movement—out of the corner of his eye he caught the papers flashing by, the file landing on his desk. "Special delivery?" he asked, as Natalie plopped down in Schanke's chair, across from him.

"End of shift. Figured I'd dropped by on my way home." Gesturing toward the file, she added, "There's your night's work . . . unless somebody turns up a body."

"Schanke's night's work," corrected Nick. Smiling, he picked up the folder and deliberately reached across, placing it squarely on Schanke's blotter, adding, "He's taking my shift tonight. I've got a date."

"Have you?" Natalie looked away, toward the office door. "Washing your car again?"

"No."

"Then it's a real date? A real 'people' date?"

"Uh-huh." Nick tried to keep his expression neutral. "I'm escorting a young lady."

"Movie?"

"Ice cream parlor, actually."

That, at least, got her attention. Raising an eyebrow, she stared at him. "How young is 'young'?"

He shrugged, then looked down at the form on his desk again, but felt her eyes still on him. "Well, when you're eight hundred years old, the age thing—"

"Means a heck of a generation gap."

Nick looked up at her, tapping his pen against his cheek. "This doesn't bother you . . . me going out on a date?"

"Me?" Natalie's hand rose to her throat and hovered there a moment as she tried for an incredulous expression and failed. "Why should it bother me?"

"Good." Hiding a smile, Nick looked back to the paperwork.

"Where did you two, uh, meet?"

"It's something Schanke fixed up."

Natalie leaned across the desk, horrified. "You let Schanke fix you up with a date?"

Before he could answer, Schanke appeared in the doorway. Puffing, he staggered to the desk. "Nick—I'm sorry I'm late. But you know Myra. First she had to change her outfit three times, then we had to take pictures. Hope you're not too camera shy, she's got at least a half a roll left. And wait until that flash blindness clears before you head out of the driveway, okay?"

Winking at Natalie, Nick rose to his feet and lifted his jacket from the back of the chair. "Take it easy, Schank. And don't worry. I won't bite."

"Well, let's hope she takes it easy on *you*. She's one tough little cookie, you know."

"I know."

By this time, Natalie looked completely perplexed. She'd left Schanke's chair and was leaning against the edge of the desk. "I can't believe Nick's going along with this."

"Neither can I," answered Schanke, with an obvious air of relief. "You know, finding somebody you can trust is just so hard these days." He caught Nick's arm as he shrugged into his coat sleeve. "Where are you taking her?"

"Ice cream parlor?" offered Nick.

"Good. Great. That's her home turf, she'll be good there. Just—order something small for yourself. She'll try to outdo you."

"I won't be ordering anything, actually," said Nick looking to Natalie for help.

And she jumped in, despite the small frown she tossed in his direction. "That lactose intolerance still bothering you?"

"Ah, geez," said Schanke sympathetically. "Sometimes I think I'm the only guy on the continent keeping the dairy industry going. Still—" He pointed at Nick. "None of those big banana splits or anything. Maybe a cup of ice-cream, sprinkles—she likes the colored ones—a little hot fudge. No strawberries, it makes her break out in a rash."

Nick met his eyes and matched his grave expression. "No strawberries, check."

Schanke slapped him on the back. "I'm counting on you. You won't be the one up at three AM if she gets a stomach ache."

"I'm certain you'll be sure to call me."

"Damn straight I would." Schanke looked at the clock on the wall. "Okay, so by the time you pick her

up, it's seven. Say you get to the place—this and that—drive her home . . . back by eight-thirty."

"Eight-thirty?' asked Natalie, staring at Nick with wide eyes.

"Okay . . . nine," amended Schanke, taking her comment as a criticism. But he scowled at Nick. "She's got school tomorrow. And if she's not in bed by ten tonight, Myra'll *never* get her up and out in time for that bus in the morning. Which means I'll have to drive her—"

"Jenny!" exclaimed Natalie. When they both turned and looked at her, she cleared her throat and added, "You're taking Jenny for ice cream?"

Nick managed to fight back a smile and stared at her with a blank expression. "Yeah. Why? Who else did you think—?"

But Natalie wasn't buying any of it. She picked up the file from Schanke's desk, smacked Nick hard in the shoulder, so that the file folder creased, then turned her back to him and her attention toward Schanke. "What's going on?"

"It's a school assignment," said Schanke, as she handed him the folder. "It's some character-building thing. The kids have to interview someone they admire and write a report. Unfortunately," he cleared his throat, "it can't be a parent or a relative. And Jenny asked for Nick."

Nick ducked his head, uncomfortable when Natalie glanced at him, and shrugged, "She's gotten the idea from somewhere that I saved Schanke's life—"

"Which is true," pressed Schanke. "Besides, the kids have to go it alone—no help from parents or anything. And I don't think I'd trust my little girl to anyone else."

For the hundredth time since Schanke had talked him into this thing, Nick turned, the words at the tip of his tongue—he couldn't do this. He couldn't deal with this much trust, not with Schanke not knowing who he was. *What* he was.

But Natalie stepped forward, as if sensing what he was about to do. Taking his arm, she pushed him toward the doorway. "Then Mr. Hero had better get going. You don't want to keep your *date* waiting."

"Nine o'clock," called Schanke from behind them. "And the colored sprinkles!"

Again, Nick nearly turned, but Natalie kept him moving toward the door. "Nat," he whispered, "I don't think—"

"You're right—you *didn't* think. But you promised to do this. And you're going to break Jenny's heart if you cancel out on her at this late date."

She wasn't going to let him get away. Natalie stayed with him, marching him down the concrete steps at the front of the station and out to his car. But once there, Nick stopped and grabbed her arm. "I've got a great idea—why don't *you* go? You're a hero, too. You help us catch the bad guys. I'll drive you over there—"

"Oh, don't tell me you're afraid of spending a couple of hours with an eight-year-old girl?" When he turned away from her and leaned on the side of the car, he could hear the wonder in her voice. "My God, you *are* nervous, aren't you?"

"Of course I'm nervous. I have a right to be nervous. And if Schanke had any idea of what I am—"

"He knows *exactly* what you are," said Natalie. But when Nick turned, horrified, she folded her arms and added sternly, "You're his partner. You're his friend. He trusts you with his life every night you go out together. And he trusts you with his daughter." When he looked away again, she laughed lightly. "Nick, it's a school project. She'll ask you a couple of questions. She'll eat some ice-cream. And you'll take her home. If it's any consolation, I bet she's more nervous than you are."

"Yeah?" Not quite believing, he dared a look back at her.

And Natalie was smiling. "If I was eight-years-old, and I had to ask my dad's good-looking partner a

bunch of stupid questions and my mom had been fixing my hair for an hour and taking pictures . . . I'd probably have a stomach ache *before* the ice cream."

"Maybe you're right." Reaching out his hand, he touched her cheek. "Thanks, Nat."

"Just get her home by nine," she warned, as he opened the driver's side door of the Caddy and slipped behind the wheel. "Schanke's going to be a basket case until you get back here and if he doesn't get a call from Myra by nine—"

"I know, he'll try to talk Stonetree into putting out an APB on us." He turned the key in the ignition, then paused, looking at her.

"What?" she asked, hands on hips.

"I was just wondering—your mother did that to you, didn't she? Fussed with your hair, dressed you up, took pictures."

Natalie bit down on one side on her lip and looked away. "Yeah. She did. I hated that damn bow."

"Any chance those pictures are still floating around somewhere?"

"Are you kidding? They had blackmail potential—I burned the pictures *and* the negatives. And you're stalling."

When she moved to smack the side of the Caddy, Nick held up his hands in surrender. "All right, all right—don't hurt the car. You're right. I'm stalling."

"You'll do fine."

"Yeah. Maybe." Nick looked out the windshield, then back at her. "One more question?"

An eyebrow arched, she eyed him suspiciously. "What?"

"You really think I'm good-looking?"

Gritting her teeth, Natalie pointed toward the car. "If you're not out of here in ten seconds, I'm starting with the tires. Then the fender. Then the hood—"

"All right. I'm goin', I'm goin'!" Nick checked to make certain Natalie was clear of the car and let the engine roar to life. In his side and rearview mirror, he could still see her standing in the parking lot, her shaking fist turning into a wave—which he returned as he sped away.

He thought about what she'd said as he made his way to Schanke's house and some of his nervousness eased. After all, it *was* only a few hours. He'd done well enough with Lisa and he'd had to keep her entertained *and* protect her from Mafia hit men. This was only a school assignment. He'd done a quick review of his current bio, just in case, so she wouldn't catch him off-guard. He had nothing to worry about, really. Other than a possible sudden illness on his car upholstery.

But, as he pulled up into the Schanke's driveway, Nick realized he'd forgotten completely about Myra and her camera. The flash had barely faded before he managed to blindly place the car in park and turn off the engine, while shielding his eyes from a second assault. "Myra—would you wait until I'm out of the car, at least?"

There were spots of light blotting out random portions of his vision, but these were fading enough for him to see that Myra was smiling sheepishly. "Sorry, Nick." She slung the camera strap over her shoulder. "Guess I just got carried away. Jenny's just getting her stuff together, she'll be ready in a second." As soon as he was out of the car, Myra looped her arm through his, walking with him up to the house.

He smiled and shook his head—it never failed to amaze him how completely Schanke and his wife had accepted him. Despite the convenient excuses that countered every dinner invitation or afternoon barbecue, they never stopped asking. It both pleased him and made him very uneasy, that he could lie to these people so easily in the face of their friendship and kindness. But if he didn't lie . . . they'd never

accept him for what he really was. They couldn't.

"Don said I should have her home by nine," said Nick, after a moment's pause. He reached forward and held the door open for her. "If that's all right—?"

"That's fine. And I bet he belly-ached about having to drive her to school. Twice in three years she's missed the bus, both times when he's been on double shift. I offered to drive, but—you know Don."

"Yeah. I guess I do." Nick stuck his hands in his pockets, again uneasy. The Schanke home was . . . comfortable, lived-in. But there was a clean, cared-for scent to the place.

Myra headed toward the living room and Nick followed as far as the doorway from the foyer, where he leaned on the sill. "You want a cup of coffee?" she asked, picking up a coloring book and crayons as she moved past an end table.

"No. Thanks anyway. And I—I'll get her home on time."

"I know you will." Myra turned toward him, looking down at the box of crayons in her hand. "And I should thank *you*. I know you've got better things to do than take on our daughter for an evening. When they gave out that assignment, they sent home a letter about being careful about who we sent our kids with. Seems like—seems like when I was a girl, things like that didn't happen. We didn't have to worry about that stuff, where I was from. But now," Myra looked up at him, puzzled, "we can't seem to get away from it. We're always telling our kids to be afraid, watch out, don't trust anybody. If they can't learn to trust adults, what are they going to be like when they grow up? Who will they trust?" Then, she shook her head, as if embarrassed at speaking her thoughts aloud. "Don't mind me, Nick. It's just that . . . my baby's growing up."

"You're doing better than Don," he promised, smiling.

She laughed and took the camera strap from her shoulder, setting the camera on the end table. "You should have seen him! He was driving Jenny crazy." She walked past Nick and over to the stair railing. Looking upward, she called, "Jenny? Nick's here." Then she turned toward him and leaned against the stairwell. "I'm not looking forward to the teen years. Once the phone calls begin, the boys start dropping by—you *know* Don's going to be impossible."

"He *did* say something about sending her to a convent when she hit sixteen," admitted Nick, with a grin. Then he looked upward, at the sound of running footsteps along the upstairs hallway, and sobered. "Doesn't hurt to be careful. Like you said—things are different now. You never really *know*. Anybody."

"Great. The entire precinct'll be staking out every boy in the senior and junior class." Myra laughed again, this time at his serious expression. "I know it's occupational hazard, Nick, but you should learn to lighten up. I won't take Don food shopping any more—I think he spends half the time checking out the other shoppers against his wanted felon list. *And* I end up with a cart full of cookies. Jenny, *would* you hurry—"

She came down the stairs at a run, slowing only as she spotted Nick. There was that shy smile, maybe a little more shy than usual, that offset her freckles. Her eyes were large and brown—definitely from her mother—but her hair favored her father. And Nick knew her attitude, from the few times he'd spent more than a few minutes with Jenny, was pure Schanke.

His unease started to fade when he noticed that the fingers she'd clasped around her notebook were almost white. Natalie was right, Jenny was as nervous as he and with far less reason. Her, "Hi," was small and soft and scared, accompanied by a nervous tug at the bow barretted at the side part of her hair.

The bow removed any further dread in him, Natalie's words again echoing in his memory. "Hi, Jenny. The dress—the dress looks nice."

She looked down at the dress, then back at him with such a long-suffering look that he understood

immediately—the sooner he got her out of the house and away from Myra and Schanke's proud-parent routine, the happier she'd be. "You ready to go?," he added quickly. "Your dad's kinda put a curfew on us . . . ."

"Oh, let me get the camera!" said Myra, turning and dashing back into the living room.

Taking a breath, Nick walked over to the stairwell and leaned against the banister. "Think we should make a break for it?"

Jenny shook her head. "No. Mom's pretty fast. And she doesn't give up. Dad left his badge one night and she chased the car for a block before she caught up with him at the stop sign."

He nodded toward the notebook. "Got some tough questions in there?"

She shrugged, then smiled. "Naw, it's pretty easy stuff. Can we—can we leave the top down on the Caddy?"

Nick matched her grin. "Already down."

"Cool."

By this time, Myra had returned, camera in hand. She got off one shot before Nick walked toward her, his stomach turning at the thought of even more photographs being taken. Sure, they were family album photos, but time was beginning to teach him the folly of leaving too much evidence behind him. "Why don't I get a shot of you and Jenny?" he asked, reaching for the camera.

It was the right thing to say. Myra relinquished the camera without a murmur and, after another three or four pictures finished off the roll, he was able to get Jenny out the door and into the Caddy. She clipped her seatbelt in place carefully—Nick didn't bother checking, the very audible click meant that it was secure. Then, with a wave to Myra, they were off.

Jenny was very quiet and, oddly enough, very small in the seat of the Caddy. She still clasped the notebook tightly and Nick realized she was trying to be on her best behavior. "You can take the bow off, if it bothers you," he said, keeping his eyes on the road.

A quick glance allowed him to catch her frown. "It looks stupid, doesn't it?"

"No. Actually, it looks very nice."

"Well, it feels stupid." With genuine relief, she pulled the barrette out of her hair, letting the thin strands fall free. After a brief shake of her head, Jenny leaned back against the seat and closed her eyes, smiling as the wind whipped down over the top of the windshield.

"Better?"

"Oh, yeah. Thanks. But Mom—"

"We'll fix it before we go in."

"Okay." She leaned forward and eyed him suspiciously. "How'd you know? About the bow? Is that like . . . like how you break cases and stuff like that?"

Nick lifted one hand from the steering wheel and wiped the corner of his mouth with his fist, trying to hide his smile. "Well, I guess you could say I had an informant."

"Dad?"

"Now that's the thing about informants—you're not supposed to tell anybody who they are. But . . . no. It wasn't your dad."

Her eyes narrowed and she sat back against the seat, arms folded across the notebook. And, in the flash of a streetlight, Nick saw that spark of concentration in her eyes that he'd seen in Schanke's gaze time and again, when the detective grabbed hold of something that didn't fit and wouldn't let go until he knew why.

Nick realized that Jenny had given herself a mission—she'd try her best to find out who'd tipped him

off about the bow. And though he was pretty certain Natalie would forgive him if he let Jenny in on her little secret, it might be interesting to see just how far she got on her own. He turned his head, mouth open to say something, when he saw a truck barreling through the red light, coming directly at them.

He threw his right arm in front of Jenny, pressing her back against the seat, then gunned the engine and leaned on the horn. Traffic scattered at the sound, two cars behind and one beside him fishtailed across the road, but there were no collisions. And the truck blindly sailed through the light, despite the car horns and angry shouts.

Immediately, Nick reached for the hand mike to the police radio, as he slowed the car. A quick glance over his shoulder and he changed lanes, u-turning the car in the other direction. "Dispatch, this is Eighty-one Kilo, over." He glanced down at Jenny. Her eyes were wide. "You all right?"

She nodded, just as the radio sputtered, "Eighty-one Kilo, I read you—thought you were off shift tonight, over."

"There's a white delivery van, no markings, missed the plate, doing about ninety down—"

"Dispatch, this is forty-nine alpha," broke in another voice. "We've got Nick's delivery van and are in pursuit. Copy?"

"Copy," sputtered the dispatcher's voice over the radio. "Eighty-one Kilo, you copy that?"

"Got it," answered Nick, with a sigh of relief. He looked down at Jenny, who was frowning. "You need any paper on that van, I saw it take the light. Over."

"Will pass it along, Eighty-one Kilo. Have a sundae on me. Out."

Nick hung up the microphone, then glanced at his surroundings. He'd automatically followed the trail of the delivery van, but now that someone else was taking care of it—

"We're not going to chase him, are we?" asked Jenny, disappointment evident in her voice.

"Your dad would kill me if he found out I'd taken you on a high-speed pursuit."

"I wouldn't tell," she protested.

Nick gestured toward the radio. "Yeah, but *they* would. He could follow the whole thing from the station."

Reaching forward, Jenny touched the microphone lightly, then looked up at him. "Could I talk to my Dad on this?"

"Yeah." He winked down at her. "But I don't think that's such a good idea right now."

"I guess not. It's gotta be used for police stuff, right?" She jumped as the radio chattered again, loudly, but Nick reached past her and turned down the volume. "So you hear about all kinds of stuff on there?"

"That's how we keep in touch with the station when we're out," explained Nick.

"How'd they know we were going to get ice cream?"

Nick bit back any unkind comments about Schanke's inability to keep his mouth shut, saying instead, "I guess your dad told them."

"Yeah." From Jenny's lop-sided smile, Nick guessed she knew well enough what his words implied. "Dad's like that at home. And Mom says it's like having a second family, working with the cops."

"Well, your dad's proud of you. He talks about you at work all the time."

Jenny muttered, "I guess," under her breath.

Nick noticed that her cheeks had reddened slightly as she looked away. He tried to remember what that was like—to be a child whose parents were proud. It was so far away in the past . . . before his perfect memory. But was a faulty memory to blame, or not having something to remember?

He pulled the car into the parking lot of the ice cream parlor. Almost before he had the keys out of the

ignition, Jenny slipped out of her belt, unlocked the door and was half-way out of the car. "Hey," called Nick, picking up her notebook from the seat and waving it at her. "Forget something?"

Jenny walked over to his side of the car and sheepishly took the notebook from him. "Thanks."

Casting a quick glance over the parking lot, Nick smiled. "You like ice cream that much, huh?"

"Well, you know how it is," she said, in a world-weary tone. "You just get so wrapped up in thinking about one thing—"

He bit back a smile at the dismissive shrug of her shoulders and said with mock seriousness, "I know exactly what you mean."

"Like on Mom's bowling nights—"

Nick kept half an ear on her conversation as he opened the door to the ice cream parlor. Jenny walked under his arm and he followed her inside, then found himself blinking at the brightness. The walls and floor were covered with white or pale pastel tiles, from which the fluorescent lights beamed. Most of the small tables and chairs were occupied by adults and children, or groups of teenagers.

Jenny headed right for the counter. Head back, she peered up at the various pictures displayed. "How about a triple banana split?"

Nick stood behind her and looked down, meeting her eyes. "How about a cup of ice cream," he countered.

Her eyes narrowed and she frowned. "Dad finked on me, didn't he?"

Nick held up his hand and counted off the items, "One scoop of ice cream, hot fudge, sprinkles—*colored* sprinkles—" he amended quickly, as she opened her mouth to reply, "and no strawberries under any circumstances."

Jenny nodded, then looked away, but it was a momentary surrender. She pointed toward the display case. "Bubblegum ice cream, hot fudge, and colored sprinkles," she informed the man behind the counter. "*And* a cherry."

Nick made a face, gazing down at the pink stuff identified as 'bubblegum' ice cream—he was *certain* that color couldn't be found in nature—then nodded at the clerk. Schanke hadn't said anything about the kind of ice cream. And, despite the color, Nick was pretty certain that particular flavor had nothing to do with strawberries.

"Will that be all, sir?" asked the clerk, as he leaned down to scoop out the pink mess from the canister.

"Uh, yeah," answered Nick, reaching for his wallet. "Wait—" He glanced down at Jenny. "Something to drink?"

"Orange soda," she said, then turned and walked over to a table.

Shrugging, Nick repeated, "Orange soda—small," to the clerk. He glanced over his shoulder, back at Jenny. She'd seated herself, opened her notebook on the table, and was prying napkins from the dispenser on the table top. Her feet didn't quite reach the floor and swung freely.

"That's $2.25," said the clerk.

"Oh, right." Nick opened his wallet, removed a few bills, and then waited for his change.

"Cute little girl you've got," said the clerk, as he returned. He dropped the change into Nick's outstretched palm.

"She's—" He hesitated, glancing over at Jenny, the denial on the tip of his tongue—she's not *my* little girl. But that would lead to more questions than either he or Jenny needed, at the moment. Deciding to accept custody of the compliment, which would be passed along to Schanke later, Nick smiled. "Thanks."

Tossing his change in his pocket, he picked up the soda and the cup of ice cream and carried them

over to the table. Jenny beamed up at him, marker in hand, as he placed the cup containing the pink goop by her. Then he slipped into the small white metal chair on the other side of the table across from her.

"Thanks. Oooh, cool, *two* cherries." Jenny popped one into her mouth, tearing off the stem, then sipped from her soda straw. Her eyes narrowed. "Aren't you going to have some?"

"No," said Nick quickly. "I—uh—can't eat—" He gestured toward the pink goop in the cup.

"Oh, lactose intolerance," acknowledged Jenny. She pulled the cup of ice cream to her and dug the plastic spoon into it. "My friend Cindy at school has that—can't drink milk or eat ice cream or cheese. What a bummer! You should see her on pizza day." Then she glanced down at her spoon and raised it toward him. "Sure you can't have just a taste?"

He should have said 'no,' but there were those wide, helpful eyes . . . and a comment that Myra had made once about Schanke not being able to refuse Jenny anything came suddenly to mind. "All right," he relented, taking the spoon from her.

Once committed, there was no way out. She watched him like a hawk. And Nick forced himself to sample the ice cream.

It was cold—like him—and didn't turn to liquid quickly enough. Making what he hoped was an encouraging sound and smiling, he picked up a napkin and spit out most of it while pretending to wipe off his lips.

"Pretty good, huh?" asked Jenny, turning her attention to her ice cream.

"Tastes like . . . ." He started, suddenly realizing the flavor wasn't all that horrible *or* unfamiliar. "Tastes like bubblegum."

"Well, duh!" commented Jenny, laughing around a mouthful of ice cream.

He laughed as well, until she added, "And there's real bubblegum in here, too. Wait a minute and I'll dig you out some—"

"No, thanks anyway," said Nick quickly. "My—uh—dentist said I shouldn't."

"Yeah, I know." Jenny nodded sympathetically. "My dentist is pretty cool. But he's always cracking these stupid jokes. And he smells like mouthwash, you know?" She stuck her spoon into the ice cream again. "So, I guess Dad told everyone I was allergic to strawberries."

"Not *everyone*," said Nick. He looked away, finding it odd that he suddenly felt like he had to defend Schanke's reputation for loose lips. "Just me. And Nat."

"Oh. Okay." Seemingly satisfied with the answer, Jenny took a sip from her drink, then pulled her notebook closer to her. "You want to me do this while I eat? Or you want me to finish first? Cause I know Dad said I probably had to be home by nine, right?" She shook her head despairingly. "Sorry. You know how dads are. He told me not to ask you to run the sirens or turn on the lights, and to say please and thank you—" She looked up, suddenly alarmed. "Did I say thank you for the ice cream?"

"I think so," he answered, forcing a serious expression—when it was all he could do not to laugh.

"Oh, good. I forget that sometimes." Relieved, she sank back against the chair. "This interview stuff is hard work. There's a lot to remember."

"I'll help out," promised Nick, still trying to maintain a serious expression. "Go ahead and ask the questions. I'll try to think up an answer while you eat."

"Okay." Jenny peered down at the notebook. "Your name is—hey, I know this . . . Nick Knight."

"Nicholas," he corrected. Jenny picked up the pen, as he spelled, "N-i-c-h-o-l-a-s."

"Cool. My real name's Jennifer." She nodded, satisfied, then touched the notepad, as if looking for the next question. "Where were you born?"

"Chicago." There was no hesitation in the lie—boning up on his bio had helped him that much. But

he fidgeted as she wrote down the information. It somehow made him uneasy, having to lie to an eight-year-old girl about where he was born.

"Okay. That's cool—we're from there, too. I don't remember much, cause I was real small." She shrugged, smiled up at him, then looked back at the paper. "I can answer the next one—you're a detective with the Toronto Metro Police, just like Dad."

"Just like dad," he echoed. A shiver ran through him—this *was* making him uncomfortable. Either that, or he shouldn't have tried that horrifically pink ice cream. He leaned forward and pointed out, "There's another 't' in Toronto."

"Oh, thanks." Tongue between her teeth, she concentrated on fitting the 't' before the last 'o.' "Okay—that's three. Question four—what did your mom and dad do when you were growing up?"

The question startled him. He hesitated, then frowned. "What?"

"Well, like, what kind of job did your dad have?" Jenny dug her spoon into the melting ice cream thoughtfully. "Your mom probably didn't work. Mrs. Kurling—she's my teacher—she says most mom's didn't used to work real jobs. But they did stuff at home that was real important and was more like a job than the kind you do somewhere else—"

Nick looked away, only half-listening to Jenny's explanation. His mother . . . what *did* she do? When he saw her she was always busy; ordering servants, arranging meals, talking to his father, and, when she *did* get a chance to sit she was carding or weaving or doing needlework. He almost—almost couldn't quite remember what she looked like.

"Nick?"

He found himself staring at Jenny, then smiled. "Yes. She uh—what your teacher said. I guess you'd say she was a . . . housewife."

"Okay." She dutifully wrote down his answer, then asked, "And your dad?"

"My . . . father." His shook his head, as his mind flashed to LaCroix. No—not his master. LaCroix had been that, but *never* his father.

He remembered . . . he remembered a salt and pepper beard and a gruff voice. Blue eyes that laughed. Or grew stern. Or grew angry. A smack on his bottom when caught doing something wrong, a strong hand on his shoulder at his investiture of knighthood—there was pride in those blue eyes that night. Yes, he'd spent more time with his father. But even then . . . he'd really never gotten to know the man. That was the way of it, back then—to resist the yoke of authority until you broke free, became your own man. And only then could you go back and sit across from the old man on cold, winter evenings, and play chess and speak of politics and policy, crops and horseflesh, sword thrusts and ancient injuries.

He'd never gotten a chance to do that. LaCroix had denied him that opportunity, by making him reborn in blood and darkness. He'd never really *known* his father.

But Nick realized Jenny was watching him. When he tried to speak, he had to clear his throat before the words would form. "My father . . . owned some land."

"In Chicago?" asked Jenny, confused.

"No. Not in Chicago." He hesitated. "Somewhere else."

"So, he was a farmer?"

"Of . . . sorts. He raised horses." And armies, he added to himself. "There were forests, we cut a lot of lumber. And we raised crops."

"Cool." Jenny scribbled across the page. "You got to ride horses when you were a kid?"

"Oh, yes," he answered, grinning at her enthusiasm. "Almost before I could walk. Rode a lot. Fell off a lot, too, until I knew better."

"Could you teach me to ride a horse, sometime? Please, Nick? I wouldn't fall off. I promise."

There were those eyes again. And, behind them, a memory of his father, sitting behind him on a horse that seemed as high as a mountain. The ground was so far away, but there were strong arms to either side of him, holding the reins over his hands.

"I think . . . that's something your dad should do," he said, his voice soft.

Jenny frowned and stirred her spoon in the soup that was left of her ice cream. "I don't think my Dad knows *how* to ride a horse."

"Well, maybe I'll teach him sometime. Then he can teach you."

He was joking, but Jenny looked up quickly and nodded. "Okay. That'd be okay."

Nick raised a hand to his mouth, wondering how Schanke was going to get out of this one—Jenny would badger him endlessly. And the thought of a city-bred cop like Schanke on a horse for the first time . . . it was too cruel. "You, ah, have any more questions there?" he asked, squinting over at the page on which she'd been writing.

"Yeah. Uh—did you have any heroes when you were growing up?" Jenny looked up. "Like Batman and stuff."

"Batman?" echoed Nick.

"Yeah. You know. Batman." When he stared at her, she shook her head. "Come on, even you can't be *that* old. Batman's been around *forever*." Then, she leaned her head on her hand. "Dad said he used to like some 'Ranger' guy. 'Lone Ranger,' I think he said. He was a kind of cowboy cop and his partner was an Indian and they had cool horses and fired silver bullets."

"Yeah, I think he did." Leaning forward, Nick asked, "What about *you*? You have any heroes?"

"Me?" Jenny's eyes widened in surprise, then her brow furrowed. "Well, Batman, I guess. Some of the other kids like the Power Rangers, but Batman could beat 'em easy . . . even without Robin. And . . . I guess, my Dad."

Nick sat back in his seat, smiling. He wasn't sure whether to pass that one along to Schanke—the man had a swelled enough head as it was where Jenny was concerned. But his question had bought him a few seconds to think *and* given him an answer. "I guess my father was my hero, too. When I was a kid."

"Okay." Jenny scribbled on the notepad, turning the page as she wrote. "But, not even Dad could beat Batman."

"I don't think he'd have any reason to."

"No. 'Cause Dad's a good guy, too. And Batman helps the cops catch the bad guys. He just catches the worse guys that even the cops can't get." She nodded seriously. "And there are worse guys out there. Lots of 'em."

"I think your dad can handle them," he said confidently.

"Well, he can 'cause you help him, right?" Jenny smiled and looked down at the page. "There's only one more question. Okay?"

Still stunned by her last statement, he nodded.

"Why did you decide to become a police detective?" She looked up and sighed. "Like, was it what you always wanted to be when you were a kid? Or did you know somebody who was a cop? Or . . . was it like Batman, where bad guys killed your mom and dad and you wanted to make it up to them? Or something like that?"

Nick stared at her for a moment, then rubbed his chin thoughtfully. He wasn't about to tell Jenny that his original decision to join the police was to somehow help him atone for his past sins—for if anyone had ever been one of the 'worse' guys, as she put it, he'd be listed among them. "I wanted—I wanted to

do something . . . good," he managed, after a moment's thought. "I wanted to *help*, instead of hurt. Does that . . . . Does that make sense?"

"Yeah, in a way." Jenny wrote something down on her notepad. "You know, I'm awfully glad you wanted to be a cop. 'Cause you were there to keep my Dad from getting shot. He told Mom about it. He thought I couldn't hear. But I could. And I . . . I never got to say thank you to you. I told you I was real bad at that."

She'd kept her head down as she wrote, but there was something in her voice. Frowning, Nick reached over and touched her chin, lifted her head up, so that he could look at her. There were tears in the corners of her eyes.

"I think you hear a lot more than you *should*," he admonished softly. Then he made a mental note to warn Schanke that his daughter was overhearing some of the copshop he was passing along to Myra. Picking up a napkin, he passed it to her.

Jenny wiped her eyes, then blew her nose. "I'm not crying," she protested, through her sniffles. "Only babies cry. I'm not a baby. But . . . sometimes I get scared about Dad, you know? About the bad guys who are out there. Or the worse guys, the ones Batman fights. They could hurt Dad real bad, you know?"

"I know," whispered Nick, very seriously. "I know."

"But, then I think, 'Hey, Dad's got Nick with him. Nick won't let anything happen to Dad.'" She gave him a slight smile. "'Cause you'll take care of Dad, right? You won't let anything happen to him?"

"I won't ever let anything happen to him," he promised. He reached across to squeeze her hand and found her fingers very small and wet from her tears.

"Dad told Mom and me that if anything ever happened, we had to call you. 'Cause you'd make sure it's all right. And that's okay, but . . . you won't let anything happen to Dad at all. Not even the worst of the worse guys. Like Batman. You'll keep 'em away from Dad?"

"Just like Batman." Then he leaned back in his chair. "You know, your dad's pretty good at taking care of himself. He's saved me a couple of times. And lots of other people."

Her sniffles ending, Jenny blew her nose again, then handed him the napkin for disposal. "I know. Dad's pretty cool. But you won't tell him I said so, okay? 'Cause . . . you know how he gets."

"Yeah. It'll be our secret." Nick stared at the soggy napkin with dismay, then dropped it into the empty ice cream cup. "Ready to go?"

"I guess." Jenny closed her notebook and slid off her chair. She picked up her soda cup, threw it in the trash, then held the trashcan flap open as Nick dumped the rest of the refuse. "Did I say thanks for the ice cream?"

"Twice," he said, holding the door open for her on the way out.

"Good." Jenny followed him around to the passenger side of the car, then slipped into the seat as he held the door open and leaned on it. "Make sure you tell Dad I said thank you. That stuff's important to him."

Nick closed the door, then leaned into the car to check her belt was clipped . . . just in case. Rounding the front of the car, he realized his palms were wet and looked down—there was a faint trace of blood. Pulling a handkerchief from his pocket, he hurriedly wiped the sweat from his palms and his forehead—he was more nervous driving Jenny now than he'd been on the way over, if that was possible.

Giving her a reassuring smile as he opened the driver's side door, Nick sat down and took a breath. Why should it be different now? He was fine. Everything went great. He'd almost survived having

temporary custody of Schanke's daughter.

But that much *had* changed, hadn't it? It wasn't like he could just hand her over to Schanke and never see her again. This temporary custody business, this 'date' had somehow become a commitment. One for which he didn't remember volunteering.

Then again, maybe he had. Schanke trusted him with Jenny, just like Jenny trusted him to watch out for Schanke. They *both* trusted him to care for one of the most important people in their lives.

Nick wasn't all that certain he trusted himself that much.

He started the engine, then looked over at Jenny. She'd opened her notebook and was looking at the notes she'd written—just making certain she'd gotten everything, he guessed. Noticing that there were slight tear stains down her cheeks, he reached over and dabbed lightly at the corner of her eyes with the sleeve of his jacket. "I don't want your dad to think I took you to a horror movie or something."

"'Cause I was crying?" Jenny smiled, eyes bright. "I *never* cry at horror movies. But Daddy does . . . sometimes. Especially the Godzilla movies. They get sad at the end. Or the movie with the big monkey—*King Kong*."

Nick matched her smile as he pulled the car out into traffic. "Yeah. Nat cries at the end of that one, too. Do you get that?"

Jenny shook her head. "Naw. It's just a big monkey. He can't breath fire or make friends with lots of other big monsters like Godzilla. But . . . I think King Kong's in one of the Godzilla movies. He swims away at the end."

"Have to mention that to Natalie." Nick stole another glance over at her. "You've asked me so many questions, I think I should ask you one."

"You asked me who my hero was," she reminded him.

"But you asked me a lot of *other* questions."

Jenny looked down at her notebook, then shrugged. "You're right. What do you want to know?"

Nick stared over the steering wheel, through the windshield. What *did* he want to know?

What was it like to live and breathe? To go to school and be allergic to strawberries and to eat bubblegum ice cream with sprinkles and hot fudge? To know what Godzilla was? To sit and watch a movie with your father and eat popcorn? To live in a house filled with love and adoring parents?

There were so many questions he wanted to ask, but they were all too much and too impossible for an eight-year old-girl to answer, right away. Jenny *would* tell him, eventually—he guessed from their brief conversation that she'd inherited the talking genes from Schanke's side of the family. But she'd also tell him in more than words alone—how she moved and how she laughed and what color flower she picked or which animal she liked at the zoo. That would take time.

He *had* time.

What he needed right now was *a* question.

"Don't make it too hard," cautioned Jenny, with a yawn. "'Cause I'm real tired from school today and my brain's not working right now."

"An easy one," promised Nick. "What do you want to be when you grow up?"

"*Very* easy." Jenny closed her eyes, leaned back against the seat and held her hands in the air, letting the wind wash over her. "Batman."

"Being Batman's already taken."

"Oh. Yeah. I guess it is." She opened one eye and peered at him suspiciously. "Do I have to answer right now?"

"You've got a long time to decide. So . . . I guess not."

"Good." She closed her eyes and leaned back in the seat again. "I mean, it's something you think about, like if Batman could beat Godzilla. But you don't really make up your mind for real 'till you grow up. 'Cause you can always be something else. If you want to change hard enough, you can always be what you want to be."

Nick took his eyes off the road for a second. She looked so confident, so *certain*, so serious . . . . "You really believe that, huh?"

"Yeah. That's what Mom says." Her eyes opened and she kicked her legs against the seat. "She knows that kind of stuff. She doesn't know anything about Godzilla, though."

He hid his smile and cleared his throat, concentrating on the road ahead. "Could Batman beat Godzilla?"

"Of course." Jenny's tone held so much childish disdain, he looked at her in surprise. "Godzilla's not *real*, Nick. Geez."

"Oh."

"Not that you're stupid or anything," she said quickly, reaching over to touch his shoulder. "I mean . . . Dad kinda thinks Godzilla's real, too."

"It's okay," said Nick, catching her hand and holding it for a moment, just to let her know he hadn't taken offense. "There's a lot of things I don't know. Maybe you could tell me about them sometime."

"Sure. That'd be cool." Jenny settled back against the seat with a satisfied smile. "Natalie told you," she said, after a second's pause.

"Hmn?" He glanced over at her. "What was that?"

"Natalie told you about the bow."

It was completely out of left field. Nick stared over the steering wheel and shook his head—he was right, she hadn't let it go. And he'd better take more care in what he said to her . . . just in case. "How do you figure that?"

"You said Dad told you about the strawberries. And you said Natalie—Dr. Lambert, but she told me I could call her Natalie," she explained seriously. "You said Natalie was there, too. And that Dad didn't tell anybody else. So if you were talking to Dad and Natalie and Dad didn't tell you about the bow, Natalie *did*."

There were holes a mile wide in the argument and the logic took curves that would have made the course at LeMans look like a drag strip, but she'd reached the right conclusion. Jenny was waiting, one eyebrow raised expectantly.

He nodded and concentrated on the road ahead. "Well, the thing about informants is you're not supposed to tell—"

"Nick!" she said, punching him in the shoulder. "That's not fair. And it's not like it's a real cop case or anything!"

Rubbing his shoulder, he decided Jenny had a lot more in common with Natalie than a shared hatred of bows. "Okay, okay, yeah, it was Nat."

Folding her arms triumphantly around her notebook, she grinned. "Knew it."

Shaking his head, Nick guided the car into the driveway, then suddenly realized he had no idea of the time. The fact that neither Myra nor Schanke were standing on the front porch of the house seemed to indicate they were at least under the wire, although—he saw the curtain on the living room window shift, as if pushed aside by a hand.

"Guess this is it," said Nick. Opening the car door, he noticed that Jenny wasn't so quick about leaving the car as she'd been at the ice cream parlor. By the time he'd walked around the front and to the passenger side, she'd barely gotten the seatbelt unbuckled.

Nick leaned on the passenger door of the car. "You have any more questions, you call me, okay?"

"Okay." Jenny tapped the notebook in her hand. "But I think I got enough. It only has to be two pages and I can write big." She slipped out of the car as he opened the door, then waited as he closed it. When he turned and before he could ram his hands in his jacket pockets, she slipped his hand into his and smiled up at him. "That was fun."

"Yeah. It was." Something tightened in his throat as he glanced down at the small hand in his. "Come on. I thought I saw your mother at the window."

Jenny half-walked, half-skipped, and he lessened his strides so that she could keep up with him. The front door opened as they reached the porch and Myra stepped out. "Hi, honey. You have a good time?"

"Yeah. Nick was cool. And he wouldn't let me have a triple banana split."

Myra met his eyes. "Oh—good. Nick, I can't thank you enough. You wanna come in for a cup of coffee?"

"No—really. I have to get back." He glanced down at Jenny, suddenly realizing that she was still holding his hand. "But, thanks anyway. Another time."

"Sure." Myra put her hand on Jenny's shoulder and pushed her gently toward the door. "You've got school tomorrow, young lady. What say we get washed up and ready for bed?"

"Yeah. Okay." Jenny tugged on Nick's hand and waved him down toward her. "Com'mere. I gotta tell you a secret."

Nick raised an eyebrow in Myra's direction, but she merely smiled and turned her head away. He squatted down beside Jenny and she threw her arms around his neck, then planted a kiss on his cheek. "Thanks," she whispered.

There were those wide eyes again. "We'll do it again," he promised.

"Okay." As he straightened, Jenny dropped his hand and moved toward the door. But then she paused in the doorway and looked up at her mother. "Mom, can Nick tuck me in, since Daddy's not here?"

Myra seemed startled for a second. She glanced over at Nick and said, "I think your dad will be back before that."

"But I'll take a raincheck," Nick said quickly.

Jenny nodded, then smiled. "Okay. See ya, Nick," she called, as she headed inside.

"Yeah." Half-heartedly, he raised a hand in a wave. "See ya, Jenny."

Myra leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek, much as Jenny had. "Thanks, Nick."

"Anytime. I mean that." He dug his hands in his pockets. "She's a—she's a great kid."

"You oughtta think about having some yourself," said Myra sternly. "You're not getting any younger, you know. And it takes a lot of energy to keep up with them."

Nick coughed into his hand. "So I've noticed."

"But I think you did okay. Jenny doesn't give tucking-in privileges to just anyone, you know." Then she glanced up as there was a thump from inside. "I'd better get her ready for bed. And you'd better get back and check in with Don." She chuckled. "I think he's a little over-protective."

Nick glanced over his shoulder. "If I had a daughter like that . . . well, maybe I'd be that way, too."

"You think about settling down, getting married," pressed Myra. Then, she placed a hand on his shoulder. "Sorry—old match-making habits die hard. But if you get serious, I've got a cousin in Quebec . . . ."

"I'll keep it in mind," he promised. Taking her hand from his shoulder, he touched it to his lips, then released her. "Good night, Myra." Nick turned and headed down the porch steps, to the car.

"Good night, Nick." Leaning against the door, she called after him. "What a waste! My cousin would

just die if she met you."

"Very possibly," he said softly, beneath his breath. He only looked back when he heard the door close, then leaned on the Caddy door for a second. He felt . . . good. Still a little shaken, but . . . good. And he had so very much to think about . . . .

The sound of a car engine made him raise his head. Schanke's car pulled up to the front of the house. Nick started toward it, surprised to see Natalie get out of the passenger side. Smiling, she stopped in her tracks and pointed at him, "Look! He survived!" Then, when he smiled and shook his head, she added, "How'd it go?"

"Good. No problems." He pointed at Schanke as he rounded the car and walked toward him. "And I've got three things to tell you."

Schanke hesitated, glancing nervously at the house, then back at Nick. "No strawberries, right?"

"We got through that part okay." Nick reached out and pushed Schanke back, against the car. "*That's* for scaring the hell out of that little girl." When Schanke stared at him, Nick glanced over at Natalie, then back at his partner. "Jenny made me promise to take care of you because she thinks you're in danger every time you walk out that door. Which you are—but she shouldn't know about it. It seems somebody's overheard some of the things you've been telling Myra about work."

"Ah, geez." Schanke raised a hand to his forehead and took a step away from the car. "Aw—yeah. She has nightmares sometimes about that stuff. We figured it was part of being a cop's kid—I mean, Myra gets the cold sweats if I'm not home on time and forget to call to tell her I'm on a double shift." He turned quickly. "What'd you say? What'd you tell her?"

"That I'd watch your back and try not to let anything happen to you." Nick looked down, then leaned against Schanke's car and sighed. "I think it helped. A little."

"Good." Schanke nodded, glancing back at the house again. "I'll talk to her about it tomorrow. You're right—I gotta watch what I say around her. When she was a baby it wasn't so bad. But now . . . she *understands* things. It's really spooky, some of the stuff she comes out with."

"Tell me about it," commiserated Nick. Then, when Natalie shot him a questioning look, he pointed to each of them in turn. "And what are you doing here, anyway? You're off shift. And you're supposed to be covering—"

"Stonetree threw him out," volunteered Natalie. "Said he was driving him nuts. First, he knocked over the water cooler."

Schanke pointed at her, "Not true. It was wobbling. I just tried to fix it—"

"Then he broke the coffee pot at the main desk—"

"It slipped." He turned toward Nick, hands out. "You know that handle's broken, right?"

"And then when he set fire to—"

"Smoke. No fire, smoke—" corrected Schanke.

Nick rubbed his eyes with his fingers. "Yeah. I get the picture. Guess that means I'm back on shift."

"No, you're off for the night," said Schanke, with a sigh. "But I owe a half-shift. And a new coffee pot." Then, he smiled and nodded toward the house. "You said three things. What're the other two?"

"At the risk of swelling your already enormous head," Nick winked at Natalie, "Jenny thinks the world of you. Everything was dad-this and dad-that. Made me sick after a while."

Schanke adjusted his tie proudly. "Is that so?"

"Yeah."

"You *do* realize there'll be no living with him, now?" Natalie said, slapping Nick on the shoulder. "Come on, quick, what's the third thing . . . . before his head bursts."

Nick drew himself up proudly. "*I* have tucking-in privileges."

Schanke reached for Nick's hand and shook it, his expression serious. "Congratulations."

"Thank you."

"You realize that means you're on call next time we need a baby-sitter?"

"Dream on," said Nick, with a grin. "You're wasting time. I think there's a little girl inside, waiting for you to tuck her in."

"Yeah. There is." Schanke smiled. "Nick, I owe you one, okay?"

"Maybe you can pay me back. I'd like to take Jenny to a movie or something, sometime."

Schanke hesitated. "I was kidding about the baby-sitting."

"I know."

"Okay. I don't think Myra'll be too put out. In fact, she may start pushing you for the humanitarian of the year award. We'll set something up. Thanks again. Nat." Schanke turned and headed up the front lawn, to the porch.

Natalie moved to stand beside him, leaning against Schanke's car. "Let me get this straight—you're *volunteering*?"

"Yeah." He ducked his head, embarrassed, then shrugged his shoulders. "She's a good kid. And, after dealing with Lisa, I figure I haven't spent enough time with kids."

"So, you're dealing with this as an educational experience? Broadening your horizons?"

"I guess." He nudged her with his shoulder, then started to walk away. "We'd better get going, before Myra starts checking the front window again."

"Yeah." Natalie followed him back to the Caddy, then around the passenger side. As he opened the door, she paused, then sniffed. "You smell like . . . bubblegum."

"Taste like it, too." Ducking his head, Nick gave her a quick kiss on the lips, then walked away, heading for the driver's side of the car, watching her.

Natalie paused, one leg in the car, then climbed into the seat and shut the door. She sat up suddenly and pointed as he entered the driver's seat. "Wait a minute—you *ate* ice cream?"

"Yep." Nick slipped into the driver's seat proudly, closing the driver's side door.

"And you *swallowed*?"

He hesitated, then looked away. "Spit it out, actually."

"But you tasted it?"

The disbelief in her tone needled him. "Yeah," he answered, glancing over at her. "It's not important."

"It's a minor miracle. *Bubblegum* ice cream." Shaking her head in amazement, Natalie buckled her seat belt. "Maybe it *would* be a good idea for you to spend time with Jenny. Ice cream. Wow. Maybe I can talk her into setting you up with a burger."

He was pulling the car out of the driveway when she leaned down and picked up something from the floor of the Caddy. "What's this?"

Nick looked over, disinterested, then realized she was holding the white bow. "That's Jenny's. Wait," he put the car in park and held out his hand, "I'll run it in."

But Natalie moved it out of his reach. "I don't think Myra'll miss it. In fact—" she held it flat against her palm and ran her other hand gently over the loops. "Maybe you should keep it. With your trophies." Smiling, she met his gaze. "A symbol of a successful, non-fatal brush with responsibility."

"Yeah. Right." Still, he moved the gear back to reverse and headed out of the driveway. "Did Schanke really set fire to something?"

"He was right—it was only smoke. He was trying to pick up what was left of the coffeepot and put

some papers down on the burner." She chuckled and put her hand to her forehead. "I couldn't blame him, really. He heard your call about the drunk driver."

"Yeah. I'd forgotten about that."

"How'd Jenny get you to eat ice cream?"

He shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "I dunno. It was . . . the damndest thing. She got me to promise to teach Schanke how to ride a horse."

"No?!"

Nick laughed at her expression. "Yeah," he admitted, after a second's pause. "It was something she did—she kind of gave me this look—"

"Oh."

There was something in the way she said the word. Nick glanced over at her—Natalie was back against the seat, idly toying with the bow. "What 'oh'? You know about this?"

"She gave you 'the' look," said Natalie. Wearing a faint smile she glanced away, out the passenger side of the car. "It's something little girls can do, sort of without thinking. Only seems to work on men, fathers in particular. I think it's part of natural selection, a survival skill. By the time you turn sixteen and the hormones kick in, it's about all that saves you . . . until you're old enough to get your own place." Turning back to him, she smiled and said with mock-severity, "Now that's a trade secret. Don't go spreading it around."

"Wouldn't think of it." He slowed the car at a stop sign. "You know, you didn't say what you were doing there. Your shift's over, Nat."

"Somebody had to keep Schanke from running off the road on the way home," she said lightly. Then, she sobered. "We parked a couple of blocks away. Talked for a while. Parent kind of stuff, until we saw your car go by and followed you in."

Nick checked traffic in either direction. "Your car's at the station, right?"

"Yeah." As he turned the car toward the precinct, she cleared her throat. "And I figured you might want to talk. Or just have someone around."

He glanced over at her, saw her smile, and something in his chest tightened. Trust Nat to know his moods better than he knew them himself. "Thanks. That—that's a good idea. Like you said, about this parent stuff—I haven't thought about my father or mother in . . . ."

"Years?"

"Decades," he said, with some small amount of shame coloring the word. "If then, even. Jenny asked me some questions about them. Other than trying to give sensible answers . . . I realized there was a lot I didn't know about them. Who they really were. What they did. What they felt."

He looked over as she rested her hand on his arm. "You aren't the only one."

"No." He managed a smile and reached up his hand to cover hers for a brief second, before returning it to the steering wheel. "It's just—I can't really remember what my mother *looked* like."

"That's right—no photos, no video—"

"No portraits, either. We weren't that—that *important*—for anything to have survived eight centuries." Tapping his finger against the steering wheel, he glanced over at her. "I think I'll paint a portrait of my mother. Maybe if I start it, it'll come back to me."

"Now that's a good idea."

"Yeah. It is." Grinning, he let his gaze sweep over the traffic. A car passed, with several children in the back seat. He caught himself checking his side mirror as the car pulled away in the opposite direction. "It kind of . . . makes me feel funny. You know, to think I'm on a list."

Natalie cleared her throat. "What?"

He chuckled again. "Sorry, just thinking about something Jenny said. Schanke told her and Myra that if anything happened, they had to call me." He shook his head, not quite understanding. "It's . . . funny."

"Nick, you've been around here a while. You know people, they know you. They trust you. You're on a lot of lists, by now."

"I guess." He shrugged, acknowledging the comment. "But—tell me if you think this makes sense. Schanke's got family—not here, but he's got family. And Myra's got lots of family, cousins . . . how many cousins?"

"I think she's related to half of Manitoba."

"Okay, so you know what I'm saying." He tapped his hand against the steering wheel again. "But Schanke told Jenny to call *me*. It's like, first there's Don, then Myra, then . . . me. I'm number three on the list."

"And that bothers you?" she asked softly.

"Scares the hell out of me."

Natalie laughed lightly and when he glared at her, shook her head. "It's called responsibility, Nick. Get used to it. *And* the fact that you've been informally adopted into Clan Schanke."

"Don't even joke about it," he groaned.

"They'll have you tossing back souvlaki in no time." When he raised an eyebrow, she added, "Hey, Jenny's got you eating bubblegum ice cream."

"I spit it out," he corrected. "And it was that 'look' thing that did it."

The precinct parking lot was empty enough so that he spotted Natalie's car quickly. Pulling up beside it, he threw the Caddy into park, then turned to her.

"What?" asked Natalie.

No matter how hard he tried—no, he couldn't imagine her as a child. "Can you still do that 'look' thing?"

She started, then smiled. "Well, gee, I dunno. It's been a while. Kind of a secret weapon, you don't want to abuse the power, right?" Looking down, she waved her hand at him. "No—wait—let me try."

When she looked up, there was enough of that wide-eyed, innocent, absolutely counting-on-you-and-you-alone-to-save-the-world look to send a shiver through him . . . as well as melt something very close to his heart. Her triumphant grin, however, ruined it. And Nick took in a breath between his teeth, hissing, "Geez, that's scary."

"You should see what happens when I *really* turn on the juice." Natalie put the bow down on the seat and unclipped her seatbelt. Her hand reached for it, but he got to the bow first.

Nick looked at it for a moment, then held it out to her. "Try it on."

She stared at him. "You're kidding."

"No. Really. Try it on."

With a heart-felt sigh, she took the bow from him and, looking in the rearview mirror, clipped it into her hair. She started to turn to face him, then quickly looked back into the rearview, startled. "Oh, God! It's even *worse* than I remembered!" He barely got a chance to see it in place before she ripped it off and tossed it at him. "Yuck!"

Nick fingered the stray hairs that had clung to the clip. "Sure you don't have any of those pictures around?" He looked up at her, half-smiling.

She looked away, then back, admitting, "Okay. So maybe one or two made it to the photo album—against my better judgment I may add."

"I'd like to see them."

"Yeah. Like in *this* lifetime." The comment ended with a derisive snort. But as she got out of the car, Natalie paused, hand on the Caddy door. "Maybe," she relented, meeting his gaze. "Sometime."

"Good." Nick nodded, then smiled. "Thanks for the talk."

"Anytime." She closed the car door, then moved toward her own car, fishing in her purse for her keys.

"Nat—one more thing?" When she turned, he cleared his throat. "Uh, if I'm going to spend any time with Jenny, I need to know about some things."

"Oh?" Curious, she took a step back toward the Caddy and leaned on the door. "Like what sort of 'things'?"

"You think—you think you could explain this Batman thing to me?"

And Nick wasn't at all certain that he shouldn't take her inability to stop laughing as a personal affront.

Daydreams & KNIGHTMARES

Be Careful What You Wish For 47
Sharon Himmanen

Ever After 55
Susan M. Garrett

A Knight in Hell 61
Susan M. Garrett

Artwork by Ann Larimer

Penguin Press

© May 1995. Susan M. Garrett. All rights revert to contributors upon publication. *Daydreams and Knightmares* is an amateur publication not intended to infringe upon the copyrights owned by James Parriot, Tri-Star Pictures, Paragon Entertainment, or any other original copyright owners of written, movie, television, or visual material. *Susan M. Garrett, 14B Terrace Ct., Toms River, NJ 08753.*

editorial

Okay, so let me 'splain . . . .

Last year I was getting together my stuff for MediaWest when I heard that there was going to be an FK party at Baycon hosted by Karin Welss and Marian Gibbons. Unfortunately, Baycon was in California and MediaWest is held in Lansing, Michigan.

It wasn't fair. So I concocted a small practical joke to play on the Baycon party-goers.

It was a story. A very sweet and ubiquitous story—wouldn't hurt a fly, this story.

For the first six pages. Then it got very dark and deep and nasty . . . .

Of course, just when the reader reached the end and they were ready to have me eviscerated or thrown into a version of Clive Barker's dementia, they were informed there was *another* version of the story. The *nice* version. The version that wasn't at all like the first one.

I did this to some people with another story once before, just for a lark. And Karin agreed to try it out on the Baycon crew (she isn't a Cousin for nothing, this one). In fact, she was such a sweet soul, she printed up copies for them to take home so they could relive the torment.

Well, now you can relive the torment, too. The two party favors—"assigment: Knight" and "A Knight in Hell," are part of this collection.

Karin doesn't deserve condemnation for having perpetrated such cruel fiction on an unsuspecting audience at my behest (that's what friends are for). *I* couldn't resist temptation. If you were ~~unfortunate~~ lucky enough, you received the story and instructions when you passed by my dealer's table at last year's MediaWest—"Read this and bring it back to me when you're done." Of course, I handed them the dark story first.

And they *always* came back. In fact, they often asked if they could spring the story on other people. I've been told at least seventeen people at last year's convention were traumatized by their so-called friends in just such a manner.

It makes you concerned for the health and well-being of the populace at large, it surely does.

Susan M. Garrett

SusanG2522@aol.com or susang@vitinc.com

BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU WISH FOR

By Sharon Himmanen

"Is this someone I should meet?" LaCroix asked, gazing up at Alyce, distracted.

Nick chose that moment to act, pushing himself up off the floor and launching himself at LaCroix, slamming into him with as much force as he could muster, sending them both to the across the room and onto the floor. He was dimly aware of two things: the faint clatter of the jade cup as it slipped from LaCroix's grasp and the clacking of Alyce's heels against the metal walkway as she ran from the slaughterhouse. But then there wasn't time to think. LaCroix was on his feet first and he seized Nick by the front of his shirt, hauling him up and slamming his knee into Nick's stomach as Nick made a feeble grab for LaCroix's neck. He gasped for breath, nearly doubling over, but before he could recover himself, LaCroix swung him around and threw him into a nearby wall. Stunned, Nick slid to the floor, unable to move.

As if from a great distance he heard LaCroix approach him, heard him speaking to him, but it wasn't until he felt something metal touch his hand, flinging it off of his chest where it had fallen, did he begin to understand what LaCroix was saying. "There

are four ways to kill a vampire," LaCroix said. "Fire, the sun, a stake through the heart. All these will work my friend. And one more." LaCroix raised his hand abruptly over his head, the metal meat cleaver gleaming and said "Decapitation!" As his arm dropped sharply Nick sat up, eyes gold and fangs bared. Without conscious thought he lashed out with his foot, catching LaCroix squarely in the abdomen before he could deal out the lethal blow.

The next thing of which Nick was aware was a sickening thud. He looked up in the direction LaCroix had been flung and saw his former master hanging limply from a rack, his body pierced by several large metal spikes. Numbly, Nick struggled to his feet. Staggering forward, he stood in front of LaCroix and looked up at his body, feeling dazed, unable to think or comprehend. In confusion, he watched the meat cleaver slip from LaCroix's grasp and fall to the floor with a clang. Nick reached up and gingerly touched the metal spike that protruded from LaCroix's chest, then slowly lowered his hand, staring at it in wonder. LaCroix did not breath, did not move. He simply hung there like a puppet whose strings had been abruptly cut.

The cup. Nick blinked rapidly, then whirled as he remembered the sound of it clattering across the floor, but he had lost track of it during their struggle. Moving back into the center of the room he carefully searched the gloom until he spotted it. It had rolled into a corner and was now tucked between two large barrels. Miraculously, it was still whole, complete.

Nick's hands shook as he slowly reached down and gently picked the cup up, hefting it in his hand. He glanced back over his shoulder at LaCroix, then looked down at the cup, closing his fingers around it. He breathed a long sigh of relief that ended in a small shaky sob, then he turned and strode out of the slaughterhouse, moving past LaCroix with one last glance up at him, his heart torn between regret that this couldn't have ended differently and joy that he had the other cup, that he was so close to finding his cure.

Still clutching the jade cup in his right hand, Nick ran out into the early morning sunlight. Instinctively he threw up his arm to shield his face as his skin began to smoke, but he lowered it almost immediately as the jade cup slipped from his fingers. It was only his vampire reflexes that allowed him to catch the cup before it fell to the concrete, before it shattered into a thousand pieces. The irony of that was not lost on him, but he'd come too far to lose this opportunity now.

But the lethal sun was burning his face and hands. Nick carefully tightened his grip on the cup and ground his teeth against the pain. Stumbling in the direction he remembered his Caddy being, Nick threw up his free arm to block the direct sunlight from his face. He didn't see the boxes and garbage cans that were in his path until he fell over them, yet somehow managed to hold the cup aloft and out of harm's way.

His vision was severely blurred and distorted but he could just make out the green of his car a few feet to his left and so he moved desperately toward it, leaning with relief against the hood. Feeling his way along the length of the car, he made his way to the trunk which he hastily popped open. Curling his hand protectively around the cup and clutching it to his chest, he rolled into the trunk, hastily blocking out the deadly rays by slamming the hood down over him.

In the quiet darkness he lay, breathing heavily for several long moments. His skin still smoked and burned. It had been many hours since he'd last fed so the wounds were slow to heal, but he could feel it starting. Cautiously he opened his fingers and looked at the cup in awe. It was still intact.

And it was his.

After all this time he had finally succeeded. He had beaten LaCroix. Not . . . not killed him, Nick realized as he closed his eyes, allowing his mind to cautiously touch his connection with LaCroix. It was

faint, but it was still there. LaCroix was weakened but not dead.

Nick opened his eyes, pulling back quickly from his connection to LaCroix, and stared down at the cup in his hands. He was suddenly lost in memories of Altun Kanal, how his desperate excavation for the cup and his quest to understand the ceremony had again been thwarted by LaCroix. He remembered the workers huddling around the fires, talking about the curse, the vampire that was plaguing them. They had been terribly frightened and Nick had found it increasingly difficult to keep them working, to keep them busy unearthing artifacts and the stone tablets that would tell him how to use the cups once he found them. Then, one evening they'd found the foreman dead, drained of blood and with a broken neck like the others, and the workers had fled. He'd heard LaCroix's laughter echoing over one of the nearby hills as he'd stood amidst the chaos of the abandoned dig and campsite, again alone and with nothing to show for all his efforts.

But not this time, Nick realized. He'd have to perform the ceremony quickly, before LaCroix could regain his strength and attempt to stop him. He had blood in his loft, as well as the other cup. He could do it tonight, then be well on his way by dawn. As a mortal.

Suddenly Nick grinned, lifting his other hand to gently trace the marking on the cup with his finger. Once LaCroix had forced him to give up that particular search he hadn't had the heart for anything associated with Altun Kanal, leaving the translation of the Mayan tablets to colleagues at Oxford. And LaCroix's activities at the sight ensured that the Enforcers would not tolerate a vampire's activities in those parts, no matter how careful and concealed, for decades to come. So he'd turned his attention to another possible cure he'd heard about during his travels, a cure said to be contained in a book of cures called the Abarat. But now he was closer than he'd ever been before. Nothing, not even LaCroix would be able to stop him now, he thought, as he again cradled the cup against his chest. Leaning his head back, he closed his eyes and took several deep breaths. It was time to sleep now, to rest. By this time tomorrow, he would be mortal again.

Nick started out of a sound sleep, instinctively sitting up and slamming his head hard on something metal. He looked around him in confusion, trying to remember just why he was in this cramped dark space. Then he heard a familiar voice. As the car bounced up and down again, Nick heard Schanke rambling on about the summer of 1976. That and the smooth feel of the jade cup in his hand helped him to remember.

Vaguely he remembered the lurch of his car when a tow truck had come and taken the car in. Nick remembered parking it illegally the night before and there hadn't been time to move it this morning. By now it must be sometime in the early afternoon, he realized. They'd probably figured out whose car this was and sent someone down to fetch it. That it was Schanke irritated him, especially when he heard Schanke call into dispatch saying he was going to 'tool around' in his car. But there was little he could do about it without having to answer a lot of uncomfortable questions.

Then with a grin he realized that answers to a lot of those questions would, in all likelihood, be unnecessary tomorrow, and he nearly laughed in joy. Double checking to make sure the cup was still safe, Nick rested his head against his arm again, and prepared to simply wait out the rest of the afternoon until it became dark enough for him to venture out. So happy was he that he decided that he didn't even mind that Schanke was driving his car around town.

Well, almost.

Clapping his hands tightly over his ears, the cup lying next to him momentarily forgotten, Nick growled "God, Schanke! I'm gonna kill you!" He felt the Caddy accelerate as they began to move down an incline. Nick licked his lips nervously, then his body was slammed to the side as the car swerved sharply. Several horns blared, but before Nick could gather his wits he was flung to the other side of the trunk as Schanke tried to maneuver out of the way of another oncoming vehicle.

It was then that he remembered the cup. Frantically, he searched the space around him for the cup, but before he could locate it, he was again flung backwards as the car sideswiped a fire hydrant. Nick was dimly aware of a green blur moving toward him as he pushed himself up onto his elbow, but before he had time to react something hard and solid smacked him squarely between the eyes. Tears of pain gathered in his eyes, but he hastily wiped them away with his sleeve, his only concern for the cup.

He found it sitting pretty much where it had been before the brakes had failed, for he was certain that's what had happened. The cup was resting next to him, to his left. Snatching it up, he hastily ran his fingers over it checking for chips or cracks. Although the spot where it had impacted with his face throbbed and his eyes still watered he used his vampire sight to detect any flaws. After carefully examining the cup for several long moments he breathed a sigh of relief and hugged it to his chest.

The car had finally rolled to a halt, and Nick heard Schanke walking around the car again and again, moaning. He wanted nothing more than to get out and strangle his partner. Luckily for Schanke the sun was still up. Instead he gingerly raised his hand to his face, wincing when his fingers contacted a large bump forming between his eyes. It was probably turning purple, too, he realized. Between that and the burns which were only half-healed he knew he'd probably make a pretty scary sight if he were to emerge from the trunk now. Hopefully, though, they'd be mostly gone in a few hours when the sun went down.

For now there was little he could do except lie there and wait. For the second time in the same day he heard the familiar roar of a tow truck, felt his car lurch then begin moving as it was attached and hauled away. And the driver had used some pretty colorful language when he'd seen the damage, which only caused the lump between Nick's eyes to throb even more than it did already.

Still clutching the cup, Nick cautiously opened the hood of the trunk, then slipped out, dropping lightly to the ground. He fought down a momentary wave of dizziness, then reached up and slammed the trunk closed. He was standing in a cluttered garage, the sounds of drilling and welding, of engines filled the space nearby although there were only a few people around. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught sight of dents and scratches marring the surface of his car, then he heard Schanke muttering to himself.

Holding onto his anger and keeping himself tightly controlled, Nick slowly surveyed the damage to his Cadillac with Schanke, who looked pale and only a slightly lighter shade of green than the car. Crouching down, however, he carefully fingered the sabotaged break line, then rose unsteady to his feet and walked forward a few steps. He was suddenly overcome with such a wave of dizziness that he lowered his head and leaned against the Caddy for support. Suddenly Schanke was there, clutching his shoulder, asking him if he was all right. Wearily, Nick lifted his head and nodded, pushing himself upright and trying not to get nauseous at Schanke's offer of souvlaki.

Schanke wrapped a supportive arm around him and began leading him from the garage, babbling about the case and what he had tried to discover at the hospital. Nick only half paid attention until he felt Schanke take the cup from his grip.

"What's this?" he asked, turning it over in his hands as Nick attempted to snatch it back. Schanke laughed. "It looks like Myra's first attempt at ceramics. Thank God she got out of that phase. Do you have any idea what it's like to eat gazpacho soup out of a lopsided bowl with a big nose on it?" As he spoke, Schanke carelessly waved the cup around, despite Nick's protests, then held it up and peered into it, making a face. "Have you been drinking tomato juice out of this or what? That's nasty."

In exasperation, Nick snatched the cup from him and stuffed it into his coat pocket. "Schanke," he said, "I want you to go to the hospital. Find out if anyone's . . . I don't know, had something bad happen recently, some kind of tragedy that might have sent them over the edge."

"What?" Schanke asked. "Nick, haven't you been listening to a word I've been saying? I just got done telling you I was just there. They won't talk to us. Not without a warrant."

"We don't need a warrant," Nick said. "All the victims were blood donors."

"How do you know that?"

"Dr. Kipper told me."

"Ah, so that's where he was," Schanke said, nodding his head. "What are you going to do?"

"I've got something I need to take care of, " Nick said, moving hastily away from Schanke. "I'll check in with you later, OK?" Without a backward glance he strode quickly toward the door, ignoring Schanke's protests. Once he was sure he was out of sight, he pushed the cup more firmly into his pocket, securely zipping it. Then, using sheer determination and willpower despite his semi-weakened state, he took to the air and headed for his loft as quickly as he could.

His loft was deserted, he could sense that from the air above it, and he alighted softly near the door that led to the lift. The flight here had seemed like the longest one of his life, and he was certain he was going to drop the cup out of his pocket at any second. In fact, he'd been so nervous he'd even considered landing and taking a cab back to his loft, but decided that he simply couldn't wait. And besides, the way cabbies drove, both he and the cup might just be safer in the air.

But now he was home. Pulling the cup out of his pocket, he was again reassured that it was in one piece. Walking into the loft, he immediately sought out the other one, which was still sitting on the table he'd left it on the night before. He held the two cups, one in each hand, looking from one to the other, hardly daring to believe that he was this close to crossing that final threshold.

Smiling to himself and holding the two precious containers carefully, he walked into his kitchen and set them both on the counter. During the excavation he'd gotten a pretty good idea of the ceremony. One had to pass the blood back and forth between the two cups, then drink it. Well, he had plenty of blood, he thought, as he turned and opened the refrigerator. Then he stopped. If this did indeed work, this might be the very last time he'd be opening his refrigerator to take out the blood he'd need to survive. The thought overwhelmed him for a minute as he stood there staring at the green bottles. Then he reached in and slowly took out one that was only half full, raising it to his mouth and pulling out the cork with his teeth.

The smell of the blood momentarily overwhelmed him and reminded him of how long it had been since he had fed, how hungry he was. But Nick pushed aside the hunger and again approached the two cups. All he'd have to do is pour blood into one, pass the blood back and forth between the two cups, then drink it.

And he'd be mortal again.

Carefully, Nick tilted the bottle over one of the cups and poured about half of it into the jade cup. Setting the bottle aside, Nick took a deep breath, then reached out and took both cups in his hands. He looked down into pouring it back into the first one. Setting the now empty cup onto the counter he raised the one filled with blood to his lips.

Again he hesitated, and he wasn't quite sure why he was suddenly so filled with fear. If this worked he would have the thing he most desired, the thing for which he'd spent the last century searching. He would regain his mortality and re-enter the world of the living, he would feel the sunlight on his face, he would be able to love a woman without fear or guilt. Other less appealing thoughts crowded his mind, thoughts of sickness, of death, of dying. The faces of all the people Nick had known throughout his long life, ravaged by age, by disease, expiring sick and alone rose up before his eyes. And as he looked upon them, seeing first the faces of his family and peers, then other faces through different ages, different times, briefly, just briefly, he wished he'd never found the cups. Or better yet, never agreed to LaCroix's offer in the first place, never known immortality, never cheated death. Nick blinked and swallowed hard, the horrible, twisting visions fading until there was just himself standing in his kitchen.

Quickly, before any more doubts or misgivings could stay his hand again, he tilted his head back and drained the cup in one quick swallow.

His hands trembled as he lowered the cup, and he stood there for a long time with his eyes closed, expecting a great bolt of lightening, some profound change that would mark his death as a vampire and his rebirth as a living, breathing man.

He waited, but there was no sudden metamorphosis, no transformation. At least none that he could sense. He was still oblivious to ambient temperature although he knew that by mortal standards his loft was considered cold His heart was still, gave a single beat as he stood there expectantly, then fell silent again. When he opened his eyes he still saw all the details of the world, its flaws and perfections with a vampire's eyes.

He was not changed. He was not mortal.

The cups had failed him.

For a moment Nick was filled with a disappointment and an anguish so profound he nearly lost all strength in his limbs. The ritual had not given him back his mortality as promised. It had only served to stoke the fire of his hunger. Angrily, he stalked to the refrigerator and yanked out a full bottle of blood, pausing only long enough to pull the cork out with his teeth before tilting it to his lips and drinking greedily. He did not stop until the bottle was empty, then he dropped it to the floor, ignoring the sound of shattering glass as he reached in and took out another one.

He finished the second bottle, and was halfway through a third when a thought occurred to him, renewed his hope. Lowering the bottle he sat it on the counter and took a step back from it, almost in disgust before turning to the cups again. "Cow blood," he muttered to himself. It suddenly occurred to him that the ritual might require human blood. That had to be why it hadn't worked, Nick thought to himself. That had to be it. Although he subsisted on an exclusive diet of cow blood Nick knew that vampires drew the most strength and nourishment from human blood. It enhanced their strength and their body's ability to heal itself quickly and efficiently. That was why he always kept a supply of human blood on hand in his freezer, for emergencies. In fact, he had to constantly remind himself to replace them once they expired—stale blood was decidedly unpleasant, especially if one was using it to aid in healing. Fortunately, this batch was only a few weeks old.

It could serve another, more important purpose, now.

He knelt down, mindful of the broken glass, and opened his freezer. Reaching in, he grabbed one bag

and tore off the top. He pulled a coffee mug out of his cupboard and dumped the frozen contents into it, then used the microwave to thaw it. He hardly ever used the microwave, preferring to punish himself and make the blood even more unpalatable by simply drinking it cold, straight out of the refrigerator.

As before, he carefully poured the steaming blood from the coffee mug into one of the jade cups, and again poured the blood back and forth. As he raised it to his lips he made an effort to keep thoughts of failure at bay. He didn't know what he'd do if this failed as well, he couldn't think about it. So he drank instead, trying not to notice how the warm blood, unaccustomed to it as he was, burned his lips and mouth. His recent feeding caused that to heal instantaneously and he drank until the cup was empty.

And again he waited.

Nothing.

Nick wanted to strike out in frustration, in anger. This was no cure, he thought to himself in disgust. This had to be nothing more than the ranting of a primitive race, a society that had allowed itself to be governed by mythology, by empty truths and empty rituals. A race that deserved to be extinct, Nick thought bitterly, as he placed the cup back on the counter. He silently cursed the Mayans and their priests, silently condemned the archaeologists who had excavated the site. They had robbed him of his hope, all of them.

He wanted to break the cups, throw them against the wall and shatter them into a thousand pieces. He even picked one up and drew his arm back, ready to let it fly. But something stopped him, some reverence for the past that he still held onto despite his disappointment. No, he wouldn't destroy the cups. He'd keep one as a reminder to himself, a lesson in disappointment, in failure. The other he would return to Alyce, for the museum's collection . . . .

The thought of the museum curator caused him to pause and he stared back down at the cups, hope flaring however briefly in his chest. Alyce might be the key; she had researched the Mayans, had studied the site, the artifacts in more depth than he. She might know more of the ritual, some vital piece that he was leaving out. She might be able to explain to him why it had failed.

Struggling to keep his renewed hope in check, for he did not think he could handle a third disappointment this evening, he walked over to the phone still holding one of the jade cups. The indicator was blinking—he had several messages. He decided that they could wait until later, that they could not possibly be as important as this, and dialed Alyce's office number from memory. It rang several times, then an answering machine picked up. Nick tried desperately to keep the disappointment over not reaching her out of his voice.

"Alyce, it's Nick Knight. I need to speak with you immediately. It's vitally important." Before he hung up, he left his home phone number, hoping that she would call back, that she hadn't been permanently scared off last night by what she had witnessed in the slaughterhouse, but afraid that that was exactly what had happened. If she didn't call him back in a few minutes, then he would go to the museum and look for her.

The door to stairwell suddenly opened and Nick stared in horror as LaCroix entered the room, a satisfied smirk on his face. He wore all black and he had a large book tucked under one arm. He looked none the worse for wear despite what had happened to him last night.

"Steel spikes can't kill a vampire, Nick," he said softly, walking toward him. "But you already knew that, didn't you," he said, almost conversationally. "Ah, yes." LaCroix indicated the cup Nick held in his hand with a slight nod of his head. "The cups." Then he looked questioningly at Nick, his face wearing an expression of mock puzzlement. "And here I thought you would have rushed home to . . . cure yourself," he said, his tone and look turning ugly at the words. "Or," he continued, then paused and looked at Nick

who stood silent, "is it that you've already tried it? What? It didn't work? Is that why you just tried to call Alyce?"

"Leave her out of this," Nick managed to growl at LaCroix, taking a step forward.

LaCroix chuckled and turned his back on Nick. He walked into the living room. "Actually, I've just come from a nice little . . . academic discussion with Doctor Hunter. It was very enlightening. She confirmed some of my own findings on a certain matter." LaCroix took the book out from under his arm and offered it to Nick. "She wanted you to have this," he said, before Nick could move, and his eyes held a look of warning. "Take it. It contains some information on the ceremony you're so desperate to perform."

Nick looked warily at LaCroix and the offered book. "You killed her," he stated, flatly.

LaCroix shook his head. "Not at all. In fact, I've granted her fondest wish, the same wish I granted for you, just as I am doing again, Nicholas." LaCroix opened the book and leafed through several pages before finding the one which interested him and pausing. "I *want* you to have this. I *want* you to perform the ceremony."

Nick stared at him incredulously, his mind barely able to comprehend what LaCroix was saying to him, still fearful that this was a trick, a trap of some sort. But he couldn't stop himself from asking, hopefully, "You're going to let me go?"

In response, LaCroix held the book out to him again and looked at him expectantly. Nick hesitated for only a moment more, then reached out and took the open book from LaCroix's outstretched hand. With one last wary look at LaCroix, Nick glanced down at the page LaCroix had turned to and began to read. As he did so, LaCroix began pacing around the room. "It's a very interesting ceremony," he said. "And once you read that it will become obvious to you why your earlier attempts failed. You see," he said, moving over to the fireplace and fingering the carvings there, his tone professorial, "you were going about it all wrong. Oh, you had the right idea. You do have to pass the blood from one cup to the other. The key is in the blood you put into the cup. It can't be just *any* blood. It has to be obtained in a very specific way."

As LaCroix spoke, Nick quickly scanned the page and as he read the description of the ceremony, LaCroix's words began to make sense. Nick closed the book in horror and slowly looked up at LaCroix as he began to laugh. "You see, Nicholas, you must rip the heart from your human *sacrifice* and while it's still beating, squeeze the blood from it into one of the cups. *Then* you pass the blood back and forth between them." He paused and smiled at Nick, his eyes gleaming. "It's all spelled out in that volume. Page 143 I believe," LaCroix added, then stopped and shook his head as Nick reached down and picked up the cup he had carried with him from the kitchen.

"You see, Nicholas," LaCroix said, taking another step toward him. "This cure might very well work. But your own foolishness, your own ridiculous high ideals, your refusal to be what you are will keep you trapped in this life you claim to hate so much. Oh, yes, by all means, cling to your cumbersome morality and all the misery and guilt is causes you," LaCroix sneered. "The cure for what ails *you*, Nicholas, isn't in the promised mortality that these cups offer. It will come in the realization that the price isn't too high, that a mortal life isn't worth worrying about, worth agonizing over." He paused and glared intently at Nick, before continuing, his voice soft, soothing. "When you get to that point, Nicholas, you'll be cured. You'll be cured. You won't want to be mortal. You'll be one of us again."

He contemplated Nick carefully, then added, "But either way, I win. Again." He stood beside Nick, looking down at the cup for a moment, then began chuckling to himself.

As LaCroix departed, the echo of his laughter was drowned out by another sound, Nick's whispered, "Never . . . ," and then the shattering of the jade cup as it slipped from his fingers and fell to the floor.

EVER AFTER

By Susan M. Garrett

The only sound was the continual whisper of the night wind through the grass. It would have to be cut soon—too tall in places, obscuring the older, abandoned headstones. But that wasn't her concern. She didn't care about the hidden markers or the bodies that had once rested beneath them, which had since turned to earth and bone, the flesh having fed worms that had lived and died, generation after generation.

Natalie could almost smell the musty after-scents of time and death. But the wind picked up again, the whistle through the grass and the clatter of the empty tree branches covering the sound of her footsteps. With the wind came the smell of moist earth, the memory of a rain that had ceased falling not long ago and threatened to fall again. Even the moon seemed shy tonight, darting from sight behind the clouds and shining only briefly before disappearing again.

Again, it wasn't her concern—there was no grass on the grave she sought. Even the rain couldn't raise the green from freshly turned earth. Despite the expansion of her world, the rules of science that had bent and broken beneath the weighty knowledge—and proof—that such things as vampires existed, there were some truths that remained universal. Nothing came from nothing. That was the way of

things.

"It was a lovely service."

Natalie stopped herself from turning, fixing her eyes on the headstone. Even in the dark the lines seemed sharp, the edges fresh and unworn. "You were there?"

Only then did she look over at Janette. Her customary black was suitable for the time and place— although the strapless dress seemed just a bit flashy for a woman in mourning. Natalie had to admit that the veil was a nice touch, the barest flicker of black lace attached to a comb in her hair.

Janette endured her gaze, frowning. "Really! Don't be foolish." But then she took a step toward the grave and Natalie saw that she held the stems of several lilies in her hand. Kneeling by the turned earth, she placed the flowers carefully. "It's the correct thing to say. All services are 'lovely.' One gets used to them in time. Part of the ritual." Having placed the last flower, she brushed the petals with the fingers of her black gloves, the hands beneath the lace almost as white . . . if less pure. "And you?"

Natalie bit back a slight smile. "I was . . . indisposed."

"In the past, I've found 'overcome with grief' works well." Janette rose to her feet, then lightly brushed the dirt from the edge of her dress and her knees. "It does tend to merit a little more sympathy. And, if they've any sense, a bit more time to yourself. Upon occasion, that time can be *very* valuable."

"I'll remember that."

"See that you do." She touched her fingers to her lips through the veil, staring down at the stone—then Natalie felt those blue eyes on her, their intensity hardly diminished by the lace. "Perhaps you think I've been unsympathetic?"

"No. I understand. You've had . . . other things to work out." Natalie bowed her head, staring down at her shoe-tops. "I haven't really stopped to think, I suppose. Ever since the accident—there hasn't really been time." Then she looked up, managing a slight smile. "But I appreciate everything you've done for me. I don't think I could've managed on my own."

Janette reached out to touch her shoulder, after a moment of hesitation. "It becomes easier. No less annoying, but . . . you're prepared. You know what to do, the next time it happens." She withdrew her hand as if disturbed by the ease of the sudden familiarity and turned her back to Natalie, looking around the quiet graveyard. "I think I'll miss this place. The club, at least . . . well, it's like so many other clubs. But this time it was special. And the others there—it's been some time since I've had such a mix."

There was regret in her voice, but it was tossed aside with a light laugh and a shrug. "Will you open another, somewhere else?" asked Natalie.

"I'm not sure. In a decade, perhaps." There was another shrug and Natalie saw the sparkle of pearl-white teeth beneath the veil, as Janette laughed again. "When I find a location that draws the handsomest men and prettiest women. Otherwise, there's no point, really."

It seemed wrong to be laughing in this place, at this time. Almost . . . impolite. Or disrespectful. But there was something in Janette's manner that lightened her heart a little, as if she shouldn't take this, or anything else, too seriously.

Natalie turned her eyes on the surrounding landscape, a field of graves and stone mausoleums and trees and shrubs, looking for . . . what *would* she see?

In a heartbeat, Janette was beside her, whispering in her ear. "Don't be impatient, *cherie*. He'll come in his own time."

"But . . . how long should we wait?"

"As long as it takes." Janette's hands were on her shoulders. She could easily make out the features beneath the flower-patterned lace veil, as she turned her head and met that blue gaze. "There's much to

do. Much to prepare." Lightly, her hand patted Natalie's shoulder, then she moved away again. "As I said, you'll get used to it, in time."

"In time." Her words were swept away by the wind, but Janette nodded in response, having heard.

For the moment, nothing more needed to be said. So Natalie contented herself with trying to memorize the place—from the dark branches that scraped against the darker sky, to the scent of the turned earth and the flash of the moonlight on the newly hewn gravestone. It was too easy now, to recall passing instants like flipping through photos in a picture album. Too easy to remember.

And, oh, so difficult to forget.

A rustle of cloth on the wind heralded his arrival. Natalie found herself holding her breath—even though she no longer needed to breathe—and looking around. But by that time he'd landed.

LaCroix strolled out of the darkness toward them. With a glance, he seemed to dismiss the gravestone, although his eyes lit momentarily at the sight of the flowers. Janette received a nod, while Natalie was treated to a grim smile. "Ladies." He walked past Natalie and bent low, picking up one of the lilies. After a questioning glance toward Natalie, he met Janette's eyes . . . and seemed to find his answer. "A touching gesture. But unnecessary."

Janette shrugged in response. "Tradition."

"Ah . . . yes." He smiled and handed the flower to her, which she accepted. "I hope I didn't keep you waiting too long."

"Long enough," countered Natalie. There was some arrogance in him that annoyed her. She wasn't certain which was worse—his theft of the flower or his air of implied leadership. "There's a lot I have to take care of before . . . ." When he raised an eyebrow at her inability to finish the sentence, she snapped, "I've got better things to do than cooling my heels in a cemetery, waiting for you."

"I'd appreciate a few moments of your time," he said. "As a courtesy. You have eternity, after all. Consider it a favor for a . . . blood relative." He gestured toward the earthen mound, and the gravestone.

Natalie's eyes fixed on it again. What a lie it was, those words and numbers preserved in stone, supposed to last through memory, into eternity. His name had been Nicholas—yes—but the surname had been an occupation, a vocation, as well as a statement of character. The birth date was inaccurate, but the date of death . . . .

The last was all too real.

"We *are* tied by blood," repeated LaCroix. "A minute of your time—a question and an answer—and we'll be on our way. You can spare me that much."

Natalie looked up, trying to meet Janette's eyes. But Janette was silent, looking elsewhere. These past few days she'd depended on Janette for her survival. She'd thought her studies of Nick and his habits would have prepared her for such a rude awakening. But her death having been so unexpected, Nick not being there, and that fierce blood hunger . . . .

Staring down at the whispering grass, then the silent mound of earth, she silently apologized to Nick for the hundredth time since she'd first feel the pangs, known the need for blood. And marveled at his ability to control it. How difficult it must have been, to have worked with mortals, walked with mortals, and not torn out the nearest throat to reach the warm blood flowing beneath the skin.

"It lessens, in time," said LaCroix. "You'll learn."

She looked up quickly, but caught herself before saying anything. He hadn't read her mind—just her expression. And he was right. Controlling the hunger, showing a guiltless face to the world, was a trick she'd master . . . in time. She owed him a few minutes, at least, before she returned home to wrap up what was left of her former life and decided what she was going to do.

His eyes had never left hers. After a moment, he looked away, back to the grave. "Will you stay?"

"Here? Hardly." Natalie swallowed and clasped her hands together as he echoed her thoughts again—he was too good at this. But then . . . he'd had time to practice. "My resignation raised a few eyebrows, I suppose. But with Nick gone— There's no reason to stay. It would be safer to go somewhere else. Start fresh."

"Sensible." He glanced over at Janette, she almost thought she caught the flash of a smile between them. "And your family?"

"I don't think it's any of your business."

"You're right." LaCroix turned those cold eyes on her. "Humor me."

Natalie didn't flinch. She'd spent her life carving up the remains of the victims left by human predators—which, in a way, had helped her to understand them. Showing fear would be a mistake. "I'm not ready to deal with them, yet. A phone call. A letter, when I've resettled."

"Sensible. Again."

"There's only Sydney, after all. And Grace is taking care of him."

He raised an eyebrow at the name, but Janette sidled up to him, the flower in her hand brushing his shoulder as she leaned forward to whisper, "Her *cat*."

"Ah." LaCroix pursed his lips, then looked back to the gravestone. "So you've no real plans, then? You're welcome to join us. We are, in a sense, family. And there's much more you'll need to know, if you want to survive."

There'd been no warmth within her since she'd awakened, other than that fleeting sense of contentment and well-being that accompanied the blood. But his words sent a chill through her that she thought herself past feeling. There was so little she *did* know.

But to travel with them, as Nick had once done . . . .

Reminding herself that Nick had spent most of his lifetime trying to escape LaCroix's reach, she shook her head. "Thanks, but I don't think so."

"It's your choice. Do keep in touch, though. I think you'd appreciate knowing when we've found him. Or . . . am I wrong?"

There was a sudden tightness in her throat as Natalie glanced back at the headstone and the newly turned earth. She refused to look at LaCroix, refused to give credence to what he was saying. "But Janette said—?"

"I only said that Nicola had died," said the soft voice, still hovering near LaCroix. "We do that all the time, when things become . . . difficult."

The grave was empty. Some sixth sense told her that, told her that the body in the coffin wasn't Nick. He was alive, somewhere else. The death, the funeral, had been arranged. He'd left this place.

He'd left her.

"Yes. He did, you know." Before thinking, she met LaCroix's concerned smile—which she knew wasn't all that concerned for *her* well being. "He brought you across. And then he abandoned you."

Again, she looked to Janette for confirmation and received a slight shrug in return. The blue eyes appeared honest. But appearances were so often deceiving.

"He told you to take care of me," Natalie guessed. A brief frown from Janette gave her the courage to add, "He couldn't stay. It was too public. They thought he was dead." Her gaze drifted back to the headstone. "That's why he had to die. And . . . move on."

It made sense, in a way. She didn't remember much about the night she'd died, or the way she'd died

for that matter. There'd been a call from a murder scene—she'd been on duty. It was down at the docks, near the warehouses. She'd remembered turning, to lock the car door.

The wooden pier had rumbled beneath her with the force of the blast—a boat berthed at the dock had exploded. There'd been a flash of light and a smell like pepper, then people scattering . . . .

It came back to her as she stared at Janette. The light and the thunder of the moment drowned out everything, except the knowledge that Nick had been there, aboard the boat. For frantic minutes she'd gone from body to body, injury to injury, doing what she could, where she could, until she found him.

He'd crawled into the shadows of a bulkhead beneath the pier; she'd guessed instinct had sent him into hiding. Her heart had been like stone as she'd dropped her bag to the sand and fallen to her knees beside him. But it had started beating again when he'd moved. Nick's eyes had opened—

But they were red-gold, wild and unseeing . . . .

"Yes," whispered Janette's voice, across the short distance. "He said—it was an accident."

Natalie swallowed and looked back at the grave. She'd assumed . . . she'd thought . . . .

Closing her eyes, she heard Nick's voice in her ear, half-strangled with fear and anguish. "Forgive me—"

The darkness would give her nothing more. Her perfect memory wouldn't let her forget what came afterward—waking to that gut-wrenching thirst in the back room of The Raven. But before that . . . .

Opening her eyes, she met LaCroix's gaze. "Where is he?"

"We were hoping you might tell us. But then, I guess he didn't have time to give you his itinerary. Our Nicholas' always been one for rushing into things. Or . . . away from them." LaCroix's smile was sharp. "I'll find him. It may take some time, but I'll find him. I always do."

Something inside her twisted at his words. Natalie looked at the dark tree branches against the night sky. Nick had spent so much time running away from what he was and what LaCroix wanted him to be. If she joined them, she'd become part of the chase. Which was only just, in that she was the reason he'd bolted.

Nick couldn't face her. Not after what he'd done to her. It *had* been an accident. But he'd add her murder to the countless others that weighed on his conscience. And then compound it with the fact that he'd brought her across, made her into something he despised . . . one of his own kind. He'd asked her forgiveness, but he'd never forgive himself.

Until she found him. And let him know in no uncertain terms that he wasn't going to hold the blame for this, along with the other things that weighed on his mind and his heart.

Then she'd tell him exactly what she thought about him running off, without an explanation, or even a good-bye.

They'd been silent, letting her work it out for herself. As she turned her head to face LaCroix again, she saw a satisfied smile on his lips—he'd known all along that once she realized the truth, there'd been no alternative. "When do we leave?"

"Tonight." He glanced over his shoulder, at Janette. "I think arrangements can be made. We'll have to travel light."

She made a face, then sighed. "I'll have everything sent after us. Why must Nicola always be in *such* a hurry!" Then she looked at Natalie, expression thoughtful. "We should feed before we go. She's hungry."

Natalie barely restrained the impulse to lick her lips and looked away. There was too much of her on the surface again. She'd fed no more than two hours ago and already she was ravenous. But she mumbled, "I can wait."

"You shouldn't. And you won't." When she stared at LaCroix, surprised at his solicitude, his gaze was

even and steady. "We take care of our own. And . . . you're one of us, now." One corner of his mouth twisted upward, in a smile. "Forever."

"We'll see."

If anything, his smile grew sharper. When LaCroix and Janette rose into the sky, Natalie followed. Leaving behind the earthen mound, and the gravestone and her old life, her thoughts centered on finding Nick, thwarting LaCroix, and feeding the blood hunger. It was enough for now. And later . . . .

Well, it might not end 'happily ever after,' but she didn't doubt that at least it would be interesting.

A KNIGHT IN HELL

By Susan M. Garrett

NICK LOOKED down at the paperwork on his desktop, then up at the clock. It was almost seven. Almost time. Why he'd ever agreed to do this was beyond him.

No, he knew why he'd agreed to do this. He owed Schanke. And if he said that it hadn't touched him to be asked to carry out this very special assignment, he'd have been lying.

A movement—out of the corner of his eye he caught the papers flashing by, the file landing on his desk. "Special delivery?" he asked, as Natalie plopped down in Schanke's chair, across from him.

"End of shift. Figured I'd dropped by on my way home." Gesturing toward the file, she added, "There's your night's work . . . unless somebody turns up a body."

"Schanke's night's work," corrected Nick. Smiling, he picked up the folder and deliberately reached across, placing it squarely on Schanke's blotter, adding, "He's taking my shift tonight. I've got a date."

"Have you?" Natalie looked away, toward the office door. "Washing your car again?"

"No."

"Then it's a real date? A real 'people' date?"

"Uh-huh." Nick tried to keep his expression neutral. "I'm escorting a young lady."

"Movie?"

"Ice cream parlor, actually."

That, at least, got her attention. Raising an eyebrow, she stared at him. "How young is 'young'?"

He shrugged, then looked down at the form on his desk again, but felt her eyes still on him. "Well, when you're eight hundred years old, the age thing—"

"Means a heck of a generation gap."

Nick looked up at her, tapping his pen against his cheek. "This doesn't bother you . . . me going out on a date?"

"Me?" Natalie's hand rose to her throat and hovered there a moment as she tried for an incredulous expression and failed. "Why should it bother me?"

"Good." Hiding a smile, Nick looked back to the paperwork.

"Where did you two, uh, meet?"

"It's something Schanke fixed up."

Natalie leaned across the desk, horrified. "You let Schanke fix you up with a date?"

Before he could answer, Schanke appeared in the doorway. Puffing, he staggered to the desk. "Nick—I'm sorry I'm late. But you know Myra. First she had to change her outfit three times, then we had to take pictures. Hope you're not too camera shy, she's got at least a half a roll left. And wait until that flash blindness clears before you head out of the driveway, okay?"

Winking at Natalie, Nick rose to his feet and lifted his jacket from the back of the chair. "Take it easy, Schank. And don't worry. I won't bite."

"Well, let's hope she takes it easy on *you*. She's one tough little cookie, you know."

"I know."

By this time, Natalie looked completely perplexed. She'd left Schanke's chair and was leaning against the edge of the desk. "I can't believe Nick's going along with this."

"Neither can I," answered Schanke, with an obvious air of relief. "You know, finding somebody you can trust is just so hard these days." He caught Nick's arm as he shrugged into his coat sleeve. "Where are you taking her?"

"Ice cream parlor?" offered Nick.

"Good. Great. That's her home turf, she'll be good there. Just—order something small for yourself. She'll try to outdo you."

"I won't be ordering anything, actually," said Nick looking to Natalie for help.

And she jumped in, despite the small frown she tossed in his direction. "That lactose intolerance still bothering you?"

"Ah, geez," said Schanke sympathetically. "Sometimes I think I'm the only guy on the continent keeping the dairy industry going. Still—" He pointed at Nick. "None of those big banana splits or anything. Maybe a cup of ice-cream, sprinkles—she likes the colored ones—a little hot fudge. No strawberries, it makes her break out in a rash."

Nick met his eyes and matched his grave expression. "No strawberries, check."

Schanke slapped him on the back. "I'm counting on you. You won't be the one up at three AM if she gets a stomach ache."

"I'm certain you'll be sure to call me."

"Damn straight I would." Schanke looked at the clock on the wall. "Okay, so by the time you pick her

up, it's seven. Say you get to the place—this and that—drive her home . . . back by eight-thirty."

"Eight-thirty?' asked Natalie, staring at Nick with wide eyes.

"Okay . . . nine," amended Schanke, taking her comment as a criticism. But he scowled at Nick. "She's got school tomorrow. And if she's not in bed by ten tonight, Myra'll *never* get her up and out in time for that bus in the morning. Which means I'll have to drive her—"

"Jenny!" exclaimed Natalie. When they both turned and looked at her, she cleared her throat and added, "You're taking Jenny for ice cream?"

Nick managed to fight back a smile and stared at her with a blank expression. "Yeah. Why? Who else did you think—?"

But Natalie wasn't buying any of it. She picked up the file from Schanke's desk, smacked Nick hard in the shoulder, so that the file folder creased, then turned her back to him and her attention toward Schanke. "What's going on?"

"It's a school assignment," said Schanke, as she handed him the folder. "It's some character-building thing. The kids have to interview someone they admire and write a report. Unfortunately," he cleared his throat, "it can't be a parent or a relative. And Jenny asked for Nick."

Nick ducked his head, uncomfortable when Natalie glanced at him, and shrugged, "She's gotten the idea from somewhere that I saved Schanke's life—"

"Which is true," pressed Schanke. "Besides, the kids have to go it alone—no help from parents or anything. And I don't think I'd trust my little girl to anyone else."

For the hundredth time since Schanke had talked him into this thing, Nick turned, the words at the tip of his tongue—he couldn't do this. He couldn't deal with this much trust, not with Schanke not knowing who he was. *What* he was.

But Natalie stepped forward, as if sensing what he was about to do. Taking his arm, she pushed him toward the doorway. "Then Mr. Hero had better get going. You don't want to keep your *date* waiting."

"Nine o'clock," called Schanke from behind them. "And the colored sprinkles!"

Again, Nick nearly turned, but Natalie kept him moving toward the door. "Nat," he whispered, "I don't think—"

"You're right—you *didn't* think. But you promised to do this. And you're going to break Jenny's heart if you cancel out on her at this late date."

She wasn't going to let him get away. Natalie stayed with him, marching him down the concrete steps at the front of the station and out to his car. But once there, Nick stopped and grabbed her arm. "I've got a great idea—why don't *you* go? You're a hero, too. You help us catch the bad guys. I'll drive you over there—"

"Oh, don't tell me you're afraid of spending a couple of hours with an eight-year-old girl?" When he turned away from her and leaned on the side of the car, he could hear the wonder in her voice. "My God, you *are* nervous, aren't you?"

"Of course I'm nervous. I have a right to be nervous. And if Schanke had any idea of what I am—"

"He knows *exactly* what you are," said Natalie. But when Nick turned, horrified, she folded her arms and added sternly, "You're his partner. You're his friend. He trusts you with his life every night you go out together. And he trusts you with his daughter." When he looked away again, she laughed lightly. "Nick, it's a school project. She'll ask you a couple of questions. She'll eat some ice-cream. And you'll take her home. If it's any consolation, I bet she's more nervous than you are."

"Yeah?" Not quite believing, he dared a look back at her.

And Natalie was smiling. "If I was eight-years-old, and I had to ask my dad's good-looking partner a bunch of stupid questions and my mom had been fixing my hair for an hour and taking pictures . . . I'd probably have a stomach ache *before* the ice cream."

"Maybe you're right." Reaching out his hand, he touched her cheek. "Thanks, Nat."

"Just get her home by nine," she warned, as he opened the driver's side door of the Caddy and slipped behind the wheel. "Schanke's going to be a basket case until you get back here and if he doesn't get a call from Myra by nine—"

"I know, he'll try to talk Stonetree into putting out an APB on us." He turned the key in the ignition, then paused, looking at her.

"What?" she asked, hands on hips.

"I was just wondering—your mother did that to you, didn't she? Fussed with your hair, dressed you up, took pictures."

Natalie bit down on one side on her lip and looked away. "Yeah. She did. I hated that damn bow."

"Any chance those pictures are still floating around somewhere?"

"Are you kidding? They had blackmail potential—I burned the pictures *and* the negatives. And you're stalling."

When she moved to smack the side of the Caddy, Nick held up his hands in surrender. "All right, all right—don't hurt the car. You're right. I'm stalling."

"You'll do fine."

"Yeah. Maybe." Nick looked out the windshield, then back at her. "One more question?"

An eyebrow arched, she eyed him suspiciously. "What?"

"You really think I'm good-looking?"

Gritting her teeth, Natalie pointed toward the car. "If you're not out of here in ten seconds, I'm starting with the tires. Then the fender. Then the hood—"

"All right. I'm goin', I'm goin'!" Nick checked to make certain Natalie was clear of the car and let the engine roar to life. In his side and rearview mirror, he could still see her standing in the parking lot, her shaking fist turning into a wave—which he returned as he sped away.

He thought about what she'd said as he made his way to Schanke's house and some of his nervousness eased. After all, it *was* only a few hours. He'd done well enough with Lisa and he'd had to keep her entertained *and* protect her from Mafia hit men. This was only a school assignment. He'd done a quick review of his current bio, just in case, so she wouldn't catch him off-guard. He had nothing to worry about, really. Other than a possible sudden illness on his car upholstery.

But, as he pulled up into the Schanke's driveway, Nick realized he'd forgotten completely about Myra and her camera. The flash had barely faded before he managed to blindly place the car in park and turn off the engine, while shielding his eyes from a second assault. "Myra—would you wait until I'm out of the car, at least?"

There were spots of light blotting out random portions of his vision, but these were fading enough for him to see that Myra was smiling sheepishly. "Sorry, Nick." She slung the camera strap over her shoulder. "Guess I just got carried away. Jenny's just getting her stuff together, she'll be ready in a second." As soon as he was out of the car, Myra looped her arm through his, walking with him up to the house.

He smiled and shook his head—it never failed to amaze him how completely Schanke and his wife had accepted him. Despite the convenient excuses that countered every dinner invitation or afternoon barbecue, they never stopped asking. It both pleased him and made him very uneasy, that he could lie to

these people so easily in the face of their friendship and kindness. But if he didn't lie . . . they'd never accept him for what he really was. They couldn't.

"Don said I should have her home by nine," said Nick, after a moment's pause. He reached forward and held the door open for her. "If that's all right—?"

"That's fine. And I bet he belly-ached about having to drive her to school. Twice in three years she's missed the bus, both times when he's been on double shift. I offered to drive, but—you know Don."

"Yeah. I guess I do." Nick stuck his hands in his pockets, again uneasy. The Schanke home was . . . comfortable, lived-in. But there was a clean, cared-for scent to the place.

Myra headed toward the living room and Nick followed as far as the doorway from the foyer, where he leaned on the sill. "You want a cup of coffee?" she asked, picking up a coloring book and crayons as she moved past an end table.

"No. Thanks anyway. And I—I'll get her home on time."

"I know you will." Myra turned toward him, looking down at the box of crayons in her hand. "And I should thank *you*. I know you've got better things to do than take on our daughter for an evening. When they gave out that assignment, they sent home a letter about being careful about who we sent our kids with. Seems like—seems like when I was a girl, things like that didn't happen. We didn't have to worry about that stuff, where I was from. But now," Myra looked up at him, puzzled, "we can't seem to get away from it. We're always telling our kids to be afraid, watch out, don't trust anybody. If they can't learn to trust adults, what are they going to be like when they grow up? Who will they trust?" Then, she shook her head, as if embarrassed at speaking her thoughts aloud. "Don't mind me, Nick. It's just that . . . my baby's growing up."

"You're doing better than Don," he promised, smiling.

She laughed and took the camera strap from her shoulder, setting the camera on the end table. "You should have seen him! He was driving Jenny crazy." She walked past Nick and over to the stair railing. Looking upward, she called, "Jenny? Nick's here." Then she turned toward him and leaned against the stairwell. "I'm not looking forward to the teen years. Once the phone calls begin, the boys start dropping by—you *know* Don's going to be impossible."

"He *did* say something about sending her to a convent when she hit sixteen," admitted Nick, with a grin. Then he looked upward, at the sound of running footsteps along the upstairs hallway, and sobered. "Doesn't hurt to be careful. Like you said—things are different now. You never really *know*. Anybody."

"Great. The entire precinct'll be staking out every boy in the senior and junior class." Myra laughed again, this time at his serious expression. "I know it's occupational hazard, Nick, but you should learn to lighten up. I won't take Don food shopping any more—I think he spends half the time checking out the other shoppers against his wanted felon list. *And* I end up with a cart full of cookies. Jenny, *would* you hurry—"

She came down the stairs at a run, slowing only as she spotted Nick. There was that shy smile, maybe a little more shy than usual, that offset her freckles. Her eyes were large and brown—definitely from her mother—but her hair favored her father. And Nick knew her attitude, from the few times he'd spent more than a few minutes with Jenny, was pure Schanke.

His unease started to fade when he noticed that the fingers she'd clasped around her notebook were almost white. Natalie was right, Jenny was as nervous as he and with far less reason. Her, "Hi," was small and soft and scared, accompanied by a nervous tug at the bow barretted at the side part of her hair.

The bow removed any further dread in him, Natalie's words again echoing in his memory. "Hi, Jenny. The dress—the dress looks nice."

She looked down at the dress, then back at him with such a long-suffering look that he understood immediately—the sooner he got her out of the house and away from Myra and Schanke's proud-parent routine, the happier she'd be. "You ready to go?" he added quickly. "Your dad's kinda put a curfew on us . . . ."

"Oh, let me get the camera!" said Myra, turning and dashing back into the living room.

Taking a breath, Nick walked over to the stairwell and leaned against the banister. "Think we should make a break for it?"

Jenny shook her head. "No. Mom's pretty fast. And she doesn't give up. Dad left his badge one night and she chased the car for a block before she caught up with him at the stop sign."

He nodded toward the notebook. "Got some tough questions in there?"

She shrugged, then smiled. "Naw, it's pretty easy stuff. Can we—can we leave the top down on the Caddy?"

Nick matched her grin. "Already down."

"Cool."

By this time, Myra had returned, camera in hand. She got off one shot before Nick walked toward her, his stomach turning at the thought of even more photographs being taken. Sure, they were family album photos, but time was beginning to teach him the folly of leaving too much evidence behind him. "Why don't I get a shot of you and Jenny?" he asked, reaching for the camera.

It was the right thing to say. Myra relinquished the camera without a murmur and, after another three or four pictures finished off the roll, he was able to get Jenny out the door and into the Caddy. She clipped her seatbelt in place carefully—Nick didn't bother checking, the very audible click meant that it was secure. Then, with a wave to Myra, they were off.

Jenny was quiet and, as he glanced down at her, seemed almost lost in the Caddy's seat. For an instant he envisioned Lisa there—he'd barely been able to keep the seatbelt on her. Lisa was used to being on her own, trying to act like an independent adult, while Jenny, who was obviously on her best behavior, probably had more attention and love and daily care than many children her age. Both children, both the same age, but so . . . different. And then there had been that other child, brought to mind by Lisa's presence—Daniel. He'd never answered Natalie, had he? When she'd asked about what had happened to Daniel, they'd been interrupted. Would she have been so dismissive of his nerves tonight if he'd told her what *had* happened—

It was the sudden shriek of brakes that broke him from his reverie, the past memories slipping away and out of reach as reality intruded. The traffic light was green—he had right of way. The Caddy moved not forward, but sideways, metal grinding and groaning against metal as a fierce jolt sent him smashing against the driver's side door. The seatbelt caught and held him as the Caddy was slammed into a parallel car, traveling in the opposite direction. He looked into the driver's eyes, saw the metal buckle toward the man, but the car's momentum tore it away, onto the sidewalk, where it wrapped around the suspension pole for the traffic light.

Those few seconds stretched into an eternity as every scream and screech and cry of flesh and metal sounded, horns blared, lights flashed, glass crashed and cracked—he threw his arms up before his face as the windshield of the Caddy shattered. It was like being inside a bullet or in a metal canoe tossed on invisible rapids. Speed somehow compressed time and terror and violence.

Until, for a second, there was only silence. Dimly, he knew that a horn was blaring somewhere. And the occasional tinkle of broken glass falling to the street.

Nick sat, stunned. Despite the seatbelt, he'd been thrown against the wheel of the car, but, touching

his chest, he realized that the bruise was already healing. For a moment, he stared at his hand as it came away wet, covered with blood. But it wasn't his blood.

The smell of it made him hungry and afraid. He hadn't turned, hadn't looked at the passenger seat. It was as if some part of him had known and tried to keep him blissfully ignorant. But reason was returning and if the courage to face what he knew had happened wasn't available, the inevitability of it forced him to look.

The passenger side door had bowed inward, snapping the seat belt . . . or perhaps the catch had been loose. It didn't matter. Jenny had been thrown forward into the windshield, then pulled back by some remnant of the strap still attached to her. Her head lolled at an awkward ankle, one arm twisted aside so that the bone gleamed through, yellow-white. Her dress—and what remained of her features—were covered in blood. There was no heartbeat, no breath.

The lack of those things deafened him. Nick shut out all other sounds—the still blaring horn, the cries of passers-by coming to help, the screams and moans of the injured all fell away, ignored. He leaned toward her, reached out his hand to touch her bloody hair. An inner fist closed over his heart and his throat. He couldn't even manage to say her name aloud.

There was no point. She was beyond hearing.

In this world.

Nick was aware of a presence beside the car door; a teenager approached, T-shirt torn and bloodied. "Hey, mister, are you—?" The boy looked down in the car, catching sight of Jenny's body. "Oh, Jesus!"

"Don't touch her!" cried Nick. Wrenching off his seatbelt with a single pull, he scrambled to a kneeling position on the seat. "Don't . . . touch her."

The boy backed off, staring at him. That's when he realized that the world was colored by a golden glow. His eyes—his eyes must be blazing. And his fangs . . . .

Nick closed his eyes and took a deep breath, trying to drive back the smell of the blood, the pain, the hurt—but it was useless. By the time he opened his eyes, the boy had run away. And, from his vantage point, he suddenly began to realize the scope of the carnage.

The car that the Caddy had smashed into *was* wrapped around a telephone pole—blood dripping from the twisted metal hulk into a pool just beside the remnants of the driver's door. Another car had been flipped over, but a woman stood beside it, arms wrapped around herself, her expression blank as someone else seemed to be talking to her, trying to help. The car that had been in front of him was pulled to the side of the street, with nothing worse than a smashed trunk, it seemed. And what had hit him from the passenger side—

It was a delivery truck, less than twenty feet away. The grill was smashed and pushed back. The driver was being helped from the cab of the truck by two people.

Again, he looked down at Jenny, his hand reaching out to touch her, then stopping. Swallowing back whatever had risen in his throat, he climbed over the seat into the back of the car, then up and over the folded top and trunk to avoid the jagged metal collision edges on either side of the Caddy. Nick jumped to the ground, his hand reaching inside his jacket for his badge.

For some reason, that was important. He had to remember that he was a cop. Metro Police. This was a crime scene. A crime had been committed.

Jenny had been murdered.

Both of the people helping the driver backed away as he held up the badge—or maybe it was because his shirt and jacket and face were spattered with blood. The driver slumped against the side of the van. Nick reached a hand to steady the man, suddenly realizing that he, too, was spattered with blood. But as he moved closer, he smelled the alcohol.

Beer. It was a sour, rank smell. No one else might have noticed it, not just then. But he could smell it. The heaviness of it hit him hard enough to make his stomach churn—he turned his head away.

And remembered the green light. Not amber . . . but green. The Caddy had the right of way. The driver had run a red light. The driver had been drunk, had run a red light.

Jenny was dead.

The rage roared to life, climbing up through his chest and setting his mind ablaze. Throwing his badge to the ground, he tightened his hold on the man's T-shirt, then tore the shirt at the collar, exposing the neck. He sank his teeth into the murderer's throat.

The blood was an afterthought. It felt good enough going down, but it fanned and fed the rage within him. It deafened him once again to the shrieks and screams around him, this time quite close and filled more with fear than pain. He let the rage, let the *beast*, feed. And when the body was drained and his fingers released the cloth and already cooling flesh, the rage had began to ebb.

Only to be replaced by fear.

A crowd had formed. He looked up, seeing the world through a red haze, snarling at the people who pointed and stared and ran. They didn't know that Jenny was dead. They didn't care. He was the only one who knew, who *cared* . . . .

The wail of an approaching siren made him start. Glancing back to his car, Nick realized he had to tell Schanke. He had to tell him before word went out on the air. For the man to lose his daughter—that wasn't something you should hear on a police radio. But his radio was smashed, covered with Jenny's blood.

The crowd parted quickly as he ran toward them, snarling; they scattered like sheep in a field when the wolf attacks. No one tried to grab him, or stop him—they'd seen him, seen what he could do. But still, he ran to seek a quiet place, an alley or fire escape. He had to get back to the station. He had to tell Schanke.

That thought took him into the air, helped him stay aloft. The night was red and black—only second sense and a feeling of home helped draw him through the darkness and to the station. When Nick saw the lights from the parking lot and the building facade, another chill ran through him. The rage had begun to fade and the hollow place it left behind was so cold and dark . . . . He'd lost something.

His badge. He'd lost his badge. He wasn't a cop anymore. This wasn't home. It was gone, it was all gone.

But they'd let him in. They'd let him tell Schanke his daughter had been killed. If they had any sense of humanity, they'd know that he had to do it. *Only* he could do it.

He'd flown to the station before, but never had he been so careless about landing in plain sight. Touching ground in the parking lot, he headed toward the front entrance of the 86th Precinct at a run.

"Nick?"

The call came from behind him—Natalie. Nick paused for a second, frozen. Closing his eyes, he bowed his head and bent slightly, hands on his knees, needing to breathe, needing to fight back the gold in his eyes, his fangs. What was he doing? He was about to walk into the station in full fury.

Natalie's steps—she ran across the parking lot— were like drumbeats in his ear, clear against the smaller night sounds of traffic and insects. "Nick? What are you doing back here? I was just on my way home—" Her voice hesitated as she drew close to him. "Oh, God—Nick? What happened?"

He straightened and opened his eyes, looking away from her—but the gold had fallen away, the beast was tamed despite that blood that had soaked into his coat and jacket, the dried flakes that still clung to his skin. Nick looked down at the ground, unable to meet her gaze on even a mortal level. "There was an

accident—a drunk driver."

When he'd gotten up the courage to look at her, Natalie was staring at him, eyes wide in horror, her hand covering her mouth. There was a sound from her, but nothing intelligible.

"Jenny's dead."

His stomach knotted, twisted, as he spoke the words aloud. And the horror in Natalie's expression changed, softened to empathy, to sympathy. "Oh, Nick. I'm so—I'm so sorry."

She placed her arms around him and he hugged her, held her tightly, knowing that the sympathy was for him, as well as Jenny. She understood what this meant to him. She was the only one who *could* understand.

And it helped a little to know that, to have her in his arms for those few seconds and to share that great grief with her. But she pulled back and he saw something else in her, some strength and sense of self-possession. "Does . . . have you spoken to Schanke?"

"That's why I'm here. I have to get to him before they put it out on the air."

"They won't announce it."

Nick broke from her embrace and took a step backward. "No, but they'll run the Caddy plates. The description of the car, the fatality an eight-to-ten-year-old child—he'll put it together, Nat." He headed toward the concrete steps, calling back over his shoulder, "That's what Schanke's good at. And I—*I* have to tell him. He can't hear it that way . . . ."

"Nick—no! You're in shock. You don't know what you're—"

By that time he'd reached the front doors of the station, only dimly aware that Natalie was following him. The entryway, oddly enough, seemed the same. Norma was seated at the front desk, gave him a greeting, turned back to her computer screen, then looking at him again, staring. Another cop—*two* cops—who were standing to one side of the information desk moved forward slightly, their eyes on him.

"Where's Schanke?" asked Nick. He walked toward Norma, toward the information desk, focusing only on her. "Norma, I *have* to find Schanke. Where is he?"

When she didn't answer at first, he turned and walked to the squad room door. Stonetree was at the door to his office, speaking to someone. He glanced over at Nick, then stared. But Nick looked past him, checking by line of sight—no sign of his partner.

"Captain, have you seen Schanke?"

"What the hell happened to you?" Stonetree stalked across the squad room, moving faster than Nick would have thought possible. "Nick? I thought you were out with Schanke's daughter?"

"I was." For some reason, he felt his lips twist into a smile. Nick tilted back his head, tears welling up behind his eyes, but he fought them. "There was an—uh—accident—and—"

"Sit down," ordered Stonetree, pushing him back into the entryway, toward the bench beside the door. "Someone get me some medical help. And get the info on that accident—we got anything on the air yet?"

"Schanke isn't here." Nick stared at Stonetree, as if daring him to contradict the statement.

And Stonetree met his stare evenly. "He took a break, went around the corner—said something about getting more film for Myra."

"Myra." There was a tightness in his throat and he looked away, back toward the door. Natalie stood there. She took a step toward him, but he lifted his hand, gesturing for her to stay where she was. "He isn't in his car, then. He hasn't heard. I have—I have to tell him."

"Captain?" came a call from one of the uniformed officers. His eyes on Nick, he walked up beside Stonetree, then turned his back to Nick, saying something in Stonetree's ear that Nick wasn't supposed to

hear.

But Nick was a vampire, and the words were clear—"We just got a call on a traffic fatality—could be Schanke's daughter, the description matches Nick's car. And there's a report of . . . Christ, I dunno. Some of the witnesses said Nick flashed his badge, grabbed the driver of the truck that hit him and—"

Stonetree's eyes were fixed on Nick's, his lips barely moved as he whispered the question. "What?"

"*Bit* him. Ripped his throat out."

Stonetree never flinched. "Hysteria," he answered.

"But they've got a positive ID. Nick *killed* the guy—"

With the barest movement of his hand, Stonetree stopped the officer from saying anything more. Putting a hand on the man's shoulder, he pushed him slightly away, then took a step toward Nick. "Is that true?" he asked, in a voice so soft that only Nick could hear.

"Yes," he answered, fighting to keep the word from becoming a snarl, struggling to keep the gold from his eyes, his fangs falling into place as the beast rushed through him again. The taste of human blood still lingered in his mouth, the shame of his own failure was on his tongue and burned his soul.

Stonetree moved closer, pushing Nick toward to the bench, turning him to face the wall and Nick realized why—Stonetree *knew*, as Natalie did. Stonetree knew what he was.

"Don't lose it now," whispered Stonetree. "Or you're gonna make a bad situation a whole lot worse."

Behind him, there was the sound of a gun leaving a holster. Nick started at the quiet noise, but Stonetree's fingers tightened on his arm, stopping him. "You've worked too hard to lose everything now."

Nick looked up, met those knowing eyes . . . and looked away. "No. It's too late. I have to find Schanke. I have to tell him—"

It was as he turned that he heard another gun taken from a holster. He looked back at Stonetree.

"They're not going to let you leave," said Stonetree grimly. "They can't. You know that."

"You know . . . I can't stay."

Stonetree gave the barest nod. "I know. But I can't let you hurt the family, Nick. I'll do what I can for you, but I have to draw the line somewhere. The line starts here. And it ends here." He held out his hand. "I need your gun, Nick. And your badge."

"My badge—I don't have my badge." He looked up, at the faces he knew as friends and co-workers. Some of the expressions were sympathetic, others disgusted, and still others . . . were afraid.

The fear burned the worst, feeding the hungry beast in his chest. The rage hadn't left, but was resting, sated by blood. And now it threatened to overcome him again, daring him to attack them, daring him to free himself, to complete what he'd set out to do. He had to find Schanke, didn't he?

There was a sound from behind him—Natalie. "Nick, give him the gun."

His back straightened at her voice, he'd almost forgotten she was there. But her words gave him an edge against the beast, her presence was a strength he could draw upon. Slowly, carefully, his left hand raised at shoulder level, Nick opened his jacket with his right hand, pulling it aside to reveal his holster.

That's when he realized that Stonetree's hand had begun to waver, that a thin line of sweat had formed along the Captain's brow. Frowning, he opened his mouth to ask—

And Stonetree grabbed his left arm with his right hand, falling against the wall. Without having to listen too hard, Nick heard the irregularity of the heartbeat, the sudden stops and starts. "Heart attack," he heard himself whisper. Then, turning to Natalie, he repeated, "Heart attack—"

She pushed past him to reach Stonetree, as the man slid down the wall. Another cop approached, but Nick snarled at him, and he backed away. Natalie needed room.

He heard someone place the call to the EMT's, heard the muttered conversation around the squad

room and the entryway—bits of words and sentences flashing past, floating away and drifting back. The sound of agitated heartbeats thundered in his brain.

"Detective Knight?"

He looked up and found himself facing a beat cop. The man had moved closer to him, his weapon was drawn. "I'll have to ask you for your gun, sir. And—if you'll please step away, over here."

There was another cop moving to his right and a third coming around the back of the desk, to move in on his left. They were trying to catch him, stop him from telling Schanke. He couldn't let that happen.

This time, when he snarled, the room turned gold. A gasp, a half-scream, and more than a few scattered oaths went through the room as he showed his fangs, turning to the officer on his left, moving forward. If he could scare them, make them back off—

But he heard shots. His body jerked to one side as he felt the slugs enter, well below his heart and his ribs, then exit through his back. Or, at least one did—the other felt like it hit a rib.

Nick looked up, surprised, at the young beat cop who stood in front of him, gun held straight out. Two shots. Two bullets. There had been no warning. Sloppy. Very, very sloppy.

He looked down at his jacket, finding the bullet holes. Two shots—one bullet in him, and one . . . .

Nick turned, only to see Natalie straighten. She stared at him, eyes wide, mouth open—but again she had no words. And this time, she fell.

He caught her by instinct, his arms going around her. And when he pulled his hand away from the wetness in her back, he found it covered in blood. He stared down at her eyes, heard the small gurgle and wheeze of a breath from her lungs—but it was her last breath. The air was leaving the body. The heart had stopped. The life was gone.

Her eyes were fixed. And empty.

The weight of her body was suddenly too much to hold. Nick lowered her to the bench against the wall, moving with her. "Nat?" He listened for the heartbeat, for the smallest flutter of life.

Nothing.

His fingers trembled as he reached out, closing her eyelids carefully. She was dead. They'd killed her. Just like Jenny. They'd killed her.

Behind him, there was sound and fury and motion. Someone was calling his name, talking to him, yelling at him—

With a scream, Nick whirled, his vision colored by crimson. The beat cop, the one who'd shot Natalie, was closest. He closed his fist over the man's hand, crushing it against the metal of the gun. The gun went off, into the ceiling or the wall, it really didn't matter. But the gun fired again, and then once more, as he felt the bones snap beneath his grip, heard the screams of the young cop, who stared at him with terrified eyes.

Another approached him from the left and he swung his arm, knocking the man back and into the wall with one blow. The others had disappeared back behind the desk or retreated further away to some place of safety. His hands around the young beat cop's throat, Nick lifted the man into the air and threw him over the desk.

And, as he stared at the crimson-tinted carnage, he realized that he could still save Natalie. There was a chance . . . but he didn't dare try it himself. Janette could bring Natalie back, could bring her across. If he could get Natalie to Janette—

A slug ripped into him as he turned and lifted her body from the bench, but it didn't stop him. Another slug slammed into the bullet-proof glass of the precinct door even as he reached for the handle,

but that, too, was ignored. Once outside, he grabbed the metal handle of the door and twisted it upward, letting the weight of Natalie's body rest against his shoulder. The door jammed in place—they wouldn't be able to get through it right away. It would give him time.

Because he needed time to save Natalie. He had to get to Janette.

Shifting her body in his arms, Nick pressed his lips against Natalie's forehead—her flesh was already cold. There was so little time left. But Janette could do it, *would* do it. There was little she could refuse him. She would give him this one thing, it was only a matter of how he asked.

Nick walked down the steps of the precinct, then reached the sidewalk. He looked upward, into the sky. He could fly but . . . he felt safer on the ground, for the moment. His car was—was gone. And Natalie's keys had probably been in her handbag, which was still inside the precinct. Behind him, he heard the banging on the the precinct door—they were trapped inside, just as he was trapped outside.

Still, his time as a mortal police detective hadn't been totally in vain. Walking toward Natalie's car, he tried to remember everything he knew about hot-wiring the new electrical systems. A wire here and there—it wouldn't be too difficult.

Her car doors were unlocked. Nick leaned forward and grabbed the handle to open the door, then stepped back and pulled carefully—he didn't want to tear the door off its hinges. Once the door was open, he slipped Natalie inside, then reached over her to clip the seat belt in place.

The action made him think of Jenny. If he'd checked her seatbelt—would she still be alive?

Closing his eyes, he shook his head, driving the thought, and the red hunger that accompanied it, from his mind. He leaned on the outside of the passenger side of the car and took several breaths, looking away from Natalie, away from the memories of the night. He had to stay in control, had to remain calm, to save Natalie.

The sound of a whistled tune caught his attention. Looking up and around, he tried to track the sound, then spotted Schanke. His partner—*ex*-partner—was strolling along the sidewalk back toward the precinct, tossing a small brown paper bag up in the air and catching it. Nick didn't recognize the tune Schanke whistled. It was enough that he knew the attitude behind it—Schanke hadn't heard about Jenny yet.

Reaching a hand inside the car, he touched Natalie's shoulder lightly—a promise to return. Then he started walking toward Schanke, his steps slow and weighted with leaden guilt.

Schanke saw him before he could speak, starting. "What? Nick? Are you back—"

Nick spoke quickly, before Schanke could take in his appearance, the blood that covered him and the bullet holes in his jacket. "Schanke—listen to me. There's been an—an accident."

They were only a foot apart by then. Nick reached out, catching Schanke's arm at the elbow, as his partner stared at him with wide eyes. Those eyes moved quickly, taking in the clothing, the appearance. He could almost see the tone of his voice, the facts begin to register in Schanke's mind. "It was a drunk driver," Nick continued softly. "Jenny's dead."

Disbelief first. So much so that Schanke only managed a strangled sound, a slight shake of the head, his eyes turning away, as if looking for visual confirmation.

"Jenny's dead," repeated Nick. Schanke's eyes turned back to him, asking him to say anything, to pretend that this was a joke, that it wasn't happening. "It was a drunk driver. He ran a light, plowed right into the Caddy. I never saw him coming, Schank. But I took care of him. He paid for it. I never saw him. We had a green light—"

He was rambling. He knew it. But Nick couldn't stop. He saw the brown paper package fall from Schanke's fingers to the sidewalk, heard it hit, but tightened his grip on his partner's arm.

"You . . . killed my little girl?" asked Schanke, bewildered. "You killed my baby?"

The words rested on his skin like acid and burned inward, searching for his soul. Nick released Schanke's arm, turned sideways, unable to look at the man. "It was a drunk driver, Don. It wasn't my fault. It couldn't have been my fault." Not like Natalie was his fault. And she was waiting for him, in the car. "I've—I've got to go."

Schanke's hand shot out, punching his shoulder, pushing him back. "Answer me, dammit! You killed my baby, didn't you?"

There were sirens in the air, quite close—all reserves were being called in. Glass breaking meant they were on their way through the door. They'd try to take Natalie away from him, shoot him so full of holes they'd incapacitate him for a while—long enough to doom Natalie. He had to get away, while there was still a chance of saving her.

"Don't push me," Nick muttered, beneath his breath. He looked back at Schanke, forcing the gold back from his eyes, panic starting to take hold of him again. "It *wasn't* my fault. I got the guy, Don. I *got* him."

"What do you mean, you *got* him?" Again, Schanke stared, but understanding lit his eyes, and horror. "Christ, Nick, you *killed* him? You killed the drunk driver?"

"He murdered Jenny! What else could I do? If he'd gone to court, they would have suspended his license for what—a year, six months?" Now it was Nick's turn to stare, why couldn't Schanke understand?

The sirens were closer. He could hear voices. They'd be discovered in a moment. And it was as he looked back, toward the precinct building, that he heard the snap, felt the metal go around his wrist.

Looking down in surprise, Nick realized that Schanke had cuffed him. The metal shone bright against his blood spattered skin. He looked up at Schanke—

And saw that his friend, the father of the little girl who'd been killed in the car, had become a cop again. There was an unbearable sadness in Schanke's eyes, but there was that uncaring steel there, too.

"I had to tell you, before you found out," explained Nick, the disbelief now filling him. "I thought—I thought you had to hear it from me. That it would destroy you if you heard it on the air, or if someone at the station— But, it didn't matter, did it? *She* never mattered. Not more than this. Not more than making the collar, solving the case. Jenny's *dead*!"

"Let's go," said Schanke, pushing his shoulder, leading him toward the front of the precinct building.

Lifting his cuffed hands, Nick shoved back. "Don't *push* me," he repeated angrily. The beast was rising in his chest—he could feel it, but he no longer tried to fight the gold from his eyes. He backed up a step, glancing over his shoulder, toward the car. "I've got to go, Schanke. I'm sorry, but . . . I've got to go. Nat needs me."

When he looked back, Schanke had drawn his gun. And there was fear in his eyes, too, now that he'd seen the gold, seen the fangs. "Nick? What the hell—what the hell's happening? What *are* you? What kind of a monster *are* you?"

He had to get back to Natalie. There'd be no time to hot wire the car. But Schanke had a car . . . .

Easily snapping the chain that linked the cuffs together, Nick held out his hand. "Schanke, I need your car keys. I have to save Nat, but my car was wrecked and hers—I don't have her keys. I need your car."

"You *did* kill her, didn't you?" accused Schanke. He held out the gun, ready to fire, as Nick approached. "You killed Jenny. And I—I sent her with you. I *gave* her to you. My God . . . ."

There wasn't time to explain or to plead. Nick took another step closer, hand outstretched, the chain dangling from the cuffs on his wrist. "I need the keys. Now. Give them to me."

Nick tried to meet Schanke's eyes, to force his will upon his partner, as he'd been able to do before.

But this time Schanke was too distraught, too unfocused. The gun steadied as Schanke said, "Nick, get back, or I'll shoot."

He took another step forward. "Schanke, I need to save Nat. I need your car."

"Nick—"

He wasn't certain, couldn't have been certain, but he thought the finger on the trigger moved. Lowering his head, he plowed into Schanke. The gun went off, firing into the night as he and Schanke fell backward, toward the sidewalk. Training kicked in—he grabbed Schanke's gun hand and smashed it down against the concrete. The gun spun away as Schanke yowled in pain, kicked at him, tried to hit him.

Keys. He needed keys. Nick placed one hand on his partner's throat, pressing hard, pinning him to the ground, as he dug into Schanke's jacket pockets. He couldn't meet his eyes, couldn't look at the face, ignored the hands that pressed at him, the sputtering sound that came from Schanke's lips. Muttering, "Keys," over and over, like some demented mantra, Nick finally found them in the left jacket pocket.

Grinning, he held them up in the air and looked down—

Schanke's eyes were wide open, staring sightlessly. "Schanke?" he whispered, tapping his partner's face with his hand. "Schank—stop kidding. Okay?"

But the tongue lolled from the side of his mouth, his hands lying flat and open against the sidewalk. In horror, Nick stumbled up and away, suddenly realizing that his hand was covered with wet-fresh blood—which matched the puddle on the sidewalk, beneath Schanke's neck. He'd pressed too hard. He'd crushed Schanke's neck. He'd broken his spine. With one hand, he'd strangled his friend.

And he'd never noticed.

A roar arose within him. He threw back his head and let it run outward into the night, the sound echoing in the silence. Nick closed his eyes, swaying on his feet. What was he doing? What the *hell* was he doing? Jenny, the driver, Stonetree, Schanke, Natalie—

Natalie.

The thought of her, the car keys in his hand, and the cries of voices searching for him caused his eyes to open. Ducking down behind a parked car, he hid just as the police officers began to arrive. In the confusion of lights and sirens, the discovery of Schanke's body, he made his way among the parked cars, keeping low, hoping they hadn't yet found Natalie in her car.

They hadn't. He remained low as he unbuckled the seat belt and shifted her into his arms, the fresh blood on his hands making his task more difficult. But he managed to maintain his hold on the car keys. And he thanked whatever stars were watching over him that Schanke's late arrival that evening meant that he'd had to park at the far end of the lot.

He knew how they worked, knew he had seconds to spare as he again buckled Natalie into the car seat, this time closing the passenger door and scuttling around the front of the car. Once in the driver's seat, he turned on the police scanner, but left the lights off, not wanting to attract too much attention. The keys worked in the ignition, the blood on them didn't seem to matter as he turned over the engine, then tried to slip out of the parking lot unobserved.

They tagged him at the lot entrance, but Nick gunned the engine. He hoped that Schanke had gotten around to bringing in the car for a tune-up as he twisted the wheel hard to the right, then left again. He lost the right front headlamp, but managed to disable the police car that was trying to block his path. A quick look in his rearview gave him a feeling of relief—both of the officers in that car were climbing out, unharmed.

Good. He wanted no more mortal blood on his hands tonight.

Nick's attention wavered between the traffic that flowed around him and the messages on the police

scanner—they were trying to track him. All precincts had been warned that he was armed, dangerous, and possibly had a hostage.

Hostage?

He looked over at Natalie, at her pale skin and closed eyes. They didn't know she was dead. And she wouldn't be, for long. He had to reach Janette. Janette would help him. She always helped him when things went bad.

Only . . . nothing *this* bad had ever happened before.

He knew the streets, knew the car placements, knew how they'd try to hunt him. From the short comments spoken over the scanner, they were planning to ambush him at his loft—good, let them think he was heading home. They'd no idea he was heading for the Raven.

By knowing where to stop, where to pause for a moment and what streets to use, he made it to the Raven without being spotted. Nick parked the car in the side alley, away from the casual sweep of the streets, which would begin once someone actually started thinking about what they were doing. He left the keys in the ignition, half-hoping the car would be stolen and lead the blue and whites on a diversionary chase. Walking around the car, he opened the passenger door, removed the seatbelt, and lifted Natalie in his arms.

He walked down the sidewalk, toward the door of the Raven. Smiling grimly, he looked down at Natalie's face—she looked asleep. And she *was* asleep, in a sense. Janette would awaken her for him. He didn't dare try it himself, not after his own two dismal failures, with Richard and Elizabeth.

The bouncer snarled at him, as he entered. He snarled back, not bothering to hide his fangs or his anger, and the bouncer backed away, surprised. Wordlessly, he walked through the crowd of dancers, who stopped as he passed them. Silence fell, with the exception of the music, which continued in the background. Whispers and comments dogged his heels as the dancers caught side of him, moved aside, or pulled others out of his way.

The vampires in the crowd looked at him with angry or fearful eyes. The mortals were confused, not knowing whether this was a floor show—some odd spectacle they were meant to enjoy—or something that they'd watch the next evening on the news.

Janette appeared before him, stopping his progress through the club. She took in the scene with one glance—him, covered with blood, the handcuffs on his wrists, Natalie in his arms. Her eyes were wide and full of sorrow as she whispered, "Oh, Nicola. It *would* come to this . . . ." Then she passed him, her fingers brushing his cheek, as she once again became the no-nonsense manager of the night club. "There's been an accident," she announced. "When the emergency people come, please let them through." She gestured toward the bouncer, who crossed the dance floor toward her, then turned back to Nick and placed her hand on his arm. "A booth."

Nodding, he followed her lead, content to let someone else make decisions for the moment. Once he reached the booth, Nick gently sat Natalie upright, then slipped in beside her. He placed his arm around her, so that her head rested against his chest and shoulder. Touching his lips to her forehead again, he noted that her skin was even cooler. There wasn't much time. And, distantly, he heard Janette give instructions to the bouncer.

"Tell the others to take what they will—they won't have another chance. They can leave from the roof for now, though there's better cover in leaving with the crowd."

Nick looked up, meeting the bouncer's gaze. The vampire growled at him, showing golden eyes and fangs. But Janette put a manicured hand on the bouncer's chest, turning his attention toward her. "It's *over*," she said sharply. "Like all things, it's only a matter of time." Her smile forced, she reached up to

touch the vampire's cheek, then kissed him lightly on the lips. "There'll be another place, another time. So, go. Tell the others. There are only minutes."

The bouncer's eyes lingered on hers. He nodded, glared at Nick, then turned. Nick watched the vampire make his way through the smoke-filled club, stopping this dancer or that. After a word in one ear, or another, they slipped away, behind the curtain that led to the back rooms. It was done deftly, without alarm or confusion. But again and again, the bouncer turned to glare at him across the room.

"He doesn't like me," whispered Nick, meeting that hate-filled gaze.

"Of course not. You've destroyed his world. He's never had it happen before. And, perhaps, it's just as well they experience it while they're still young. It's a survival skill they must learn." She leaned on his shoulder and stared down at him. "Nicola, what *am* I to do with you?"

He met her eyes, those blue eyes he knew so well, and tried to smile. "It's all gone wrong."

"So I see." She gestured toward Natalie. "What happened? The short version, please. We haven't much time, from the look of your bracelets—unless your tastes in 'play' have changed."

He brushed Natalie's hair with his fingertips, staring down at her. "Someone tried to shoot me. She was standing behind me—I didn't realize. The bullet—"

"Went through?" When he didn't look up, he heard her sigh. "I told you this playing mortal would only bring you grief. You realize, we must leave now?"

"Yes. There's nothing for me here, anymore." Then he looked up. "Janette, you have to bring Natalie across before we go."

Her hand fluttered to the collar of her black dress, to her throat in surprise. "Me?"

"You know I can't. I've *tried* and it hasn't worked. I won't risk her." He raised his hand, grabbing her wrist. "You must. If you have any love for me, you *must*."

Her hand rested on his, pressed against his fingers—he realized that he was squeezing her wrist too hard and released her, quickly. But Janette continued to stare down at him. "You've phrased it badly, but I expect that of you by now, Nicola. All right. let me see."

She leaned past him, her fingers reaching out to touch the side of Natalie's face, her neck. And then she withdrew quickly, holding her fingers to her chest as if burned. "You didn't kill her?"

Nick looked up in surprise and annoyance. "No! I'd *never* hurt her."

"You've done well enough by not trying," whispered Janette. When he looked back down at Natalie, Janette's finger touched his chin, turning him toward her. Her hands on either side of his face, she leaned toward him. "Nicola, she's dead. She died of the gunshot. She's been dead all this while. I can't bring her across. She's gone."

Her words were spoken in a soft and gentle tone, but the content ripped at his heart like a knife. Disbelieving, Nick reached up and grabbed Janette by the throat, hissing, "Liar! You're jealous of her. You've always been jealous of her. You'll do this for me or I'll kill you. I swear, I'll *kill* you!"

The rage rushed through him, the beast had been brought to life again. Janette's eyes widened and he saw gold, heard the beginnings of her snarl—

Then they both heard the sirens from outside, even above the music of the club.

So, assumedly, did the other vampire patrons. They all looked up at the sound, looking for guidance, for instructions—from Janette. She wrested Nick's hand from her throat and turned, just at the bouncer approached. "Tell them to go," she ordered sharply. "Clear the club. You stay till the last. Bar the front and the rear and leave by the roof. Have you set everything else in motion? There'll be nothing left?"

The bouncer nodded, avoiding Nick's gaze. "Yes, of course. A match should do it. But you . . . ?"

"Will be out in time, not to fear." The wail of the sirens grew louder—now the mortal dancers had

realized that something was wrong and had begun to stop in their tracks, looking around and at one another in alarm. "Have someone tell them Nick's here—he's armed, and has two hostages. Tell them he's got the club rigged to explode. It'll buy me some time."

The bouncer glanced over at Nick, then back at Janette. "They'll look for bodies—"

"So take three mortals—two women and a man. They won't be missed. And they'll be charred beyond recognition." She, too, glanced at Nick, raising an eyebrow as he stared back blankly. "Go. Take care of it. I'll see you later."

"Yes. All right."

This time, the bouncer didn't look behind him as he walked into the crowd. He said something above the music, shouted some words, and people began to scream. There was a mad dash for the door, but he caught the arms of two women, gesturing at another vampire to waylay one of the men.

A knot tightened in his stomach, but Nick looked down to Natalie in his arms. He continued to stroke her hair, pressed his lips against her forehead again. He had to save her. He *had* to.

Janette was beside him, her hand on his shoulder, her chin resting against the top of his head. "After all this time, you're so willing to toss your scruples away for her? How I've underestimated that. You love her that much, Nicola?" Moving down to his level, she smiled, touching his chin with her fingertip. "And what I would give to have you feel that way for me."

She leaned forward, lips touching his. And, as they parted, he whispered, "You'll save her, then? For me?"

Some darkness clouded her eyes, some sadness, but Janette didn't look away. "Yes. All right. But we must leave here, first. If it's to be done right, we must get to safety."

Nick looked down at Natalie, touched her cheek. "She's so cold. What about time—?"

Leaning forward, Janette caught his hand and brought it to her own lips. "She has eternity. But only if you get out of here, now. Go to the roof. The helicopters—?"

By this time, the club had emptied. Even the bouncer had gone. "Choppers," corrected Nick absently, his gaze going back to Natalie.

"Choppers. The police choppers will take a moment more—we must be out and across the roof before they arrive. There are five buildings beside one another, then a leap across an alley, then five more and a warehouse I own—I have a bolt hole there. They won't find us. And I've enough money and papers to get us far away from here."

He looked from her, to Natalie, and back again. "You'll bring her across, then? When we reach the warehouse?"

"Yes. But we must reach it first, no?" Releasing his hand, she gestured toward the back of the club. "Go. I'll be with you in a moment. I have to end this—remove any traces of our presence."

Rising to his feet, Nick walked toward her. He took her hand, kissed the knuckles, then drew her close and kissed her on the lips. "Thank you," he whispered, between kisses. "Janette, *mon coeur*, thank you."

After a moment, she put a hand to his chest and pushed him back. "Oh, how I wish we had time for this," she said breathlessly, staring into his eyes. "But . . . we don't. Take her, Nicola. Be safe. Or I cannot do what I must, now."

Catching her hand again, he kissed it once more, muttering, "Thank you." Then he ran to the booth and lifted Natalie easily in his arms, his heart light for the first time since the beginning of that horrid evening. He ran for the back room, but paused at the doorway as Janette called his name.

"Nicola?" When he turned, she smiled and blew him a kiss. "The warehouse. Don't stop, don't wait for me, all right? I'll be right behind you. And, know that I'll always love you, *mon coeur*."

Smiling, Nick turned and headed to the back stairway that led to the roof of the building. The door had been left open by the other vampires, many of whom had no doubt fled with their few possessions that way as Janette had instructed.

It wasn't anywhere near midnight. Under the light-lacking gaze of the new moon, shadow ruled more often than not. He, too, followed Janette's instructions, running across the flat rooftops, leaping the brick casements that separated building from building as he might have crossed the stone battlements of a castle centuries before. The leaps across the alleys were like short flights. And, as he ran and flew, he hugged Natalie close to him, trying not to jostle her. She could feel nothing now, but she would soon enough, when Janette brought her back across. And then the three of them would be free to walk the world, to walk the night.

The warehouse he found easily enough. Nick paused on its rooftop, then leaned down and rested Natalie against the brick and wood outcropping that held the door. He turned and looked with wonder at how far he had come from the Raven in so short a span—he wasn't winded and yet he could barely make out the rooftop from where he stood, even with his preternatural eyesight. Joy and light filled him at the thought that he might have succeeded in saving some brightness from the dark hell of this night. Janette would save him.

She always had.

The flash, when it came, was almost brighter than the sun. Instinctively, he raised his hand to his eyes, covering them. And the sound that followed thundered and rumbled so much that even the roof on which he stood shook beneath his feet, endangering his footing.

At that instant, he heard Janette's scream in his ears, short and clipped, and filled with pain. And a knife blade drove beneath his ribs, into his heart.

That was what it felt like. His knees gave way and he fell to the rooftop, gasping. Tears came to his eyes and he reached a hand down to the rough gravel to keep himself from falling. Inside, a damp emptiness seemed to swallow his soul.

Nick looked up, despite the glare of that bright fire and the smoke that poured from the Raven, billowing gray against the distant sky. He knew full well that Janette was dead.

It was then that her conversation with the Bouncer began to make sense. Of course, she had to destroy the resting place of the sleeping vampires, the stock of human blood that fed them all, the records of her purchases and her clientele. While he had thought only of himself, of Natalie, Janette had kept to the Code and protected the others of their kind. The explosion had been of such a nature that there would be little evidence left and none of that would make sense to the fire and police investigators. They'd been told that he'd wired the place to blow. And they'd assume that a cop had gone mad, that the car accident and Jenny's death had finally tipped him over the edge and that he'd gone on a rampage.

It would be as good an explanation as any. And he had a feeling that the bouncer from the Raven would take care of his loft, as well. He was bound by duty to the Code, to Janette, to make certain the others, the secret existence of the vampires in Toronto, would be safe.

Resting his forehead down against the gravel, he let his bloody tears fall. Had she tried to get out and misjudged the timing? Or had Janette known she wouldn't escape the fire and flames? Either way, she'd saved him, she'd sent him out deliberately.

She'd left him alone.

And now . . . Natalie couldn't be brought across. Unless he did it himself.

Pushing himself up from the rooftop, he struggled to his feet, wiping away the gravel that clung to his skin and his clothing. He turned, gazing at Natalie, where he'd left her by the doorway to the building

below. He knew what had happened before. It had happened with Richard, and Elizabeth before him. They'd become more than mortal and that change had unleashed some madness within them. They couldn't control themselves, couldn't be controlled. And this was what he might do to Natalie.

There was a way to make it work. His own existence, and Janette's, had proven that much. If he stayed with Natalie, watched her, cared for her, kept her on a tight rein until she regained control of herself and made peace with what she was . . . would she be all right, then? Was that the key to it? Had LaCroix been right all along, that acceptance was necessary to survive, to *thrive* as a vampire?

Closing his eyes, Nick hung his head and thought for a moment of his master, his teacher. It was too late to make amends, but this thing he would do and do it right. He had to take the chance of bringing Natalie across. Without her . . . he had nothing left. He was alone.

And that he could not survive.

The gravel on the rooftop crunched beneath his feet as made his way to her side. He stood, staring down at her for a moment, then knelt beside her. There was blood all over her, from his having carried her, shifted her—it had rubbed off from him. Jenny's blood, the driver's blood, Schanke's blood . . . and now he would give her his own. She'd be reborn in blood. Not the most auspicious of beginnings.

Reaching out, he brushed the hair from her neck, moved the collar of her jacket and blouse, baring the skin. Tears gathered at the corner of his eyes, and Nick muttered a plea for forgiveness. From Natalie, from whatever God might have doomed him to this hell. He closed his eyes and let the blood scent overwhelm him, let the beast free, one hand resting on the wall behind her, steadying him as he prepared himself.

When he opened his eyes, he saw her bathed in a golden glow, like an angel. Snarling, he opened his mouth, reared back to sink his fangs into her neck, into the cold flesh—

And stopped. Pushing back from the wall, he landed on the gravel and covered his eyes with his arm, hoping to hide himself from the night, from Natalie's dead gaze, from his own shame. He couldn't do it. If he should fail, she'd have to die again. And he couldn't bear that. It would be better to stalk the darkness alone, than to give her back some form of life and have to take it from her, to see her warped and twisted beyond repair and then have to destroy her because she couldn't be what she was.

"Is this how far you've fallen, Nicholas? Feeding from corpses?"

The sound of the voice stunned him. Nick dropped his arm from his eyes and stared at the darkness.

His footsteps, as he crossed the gravel, were the light tread of the dead, but still solid. This was no ghost, no phantasm of his maddened brain. It *was* LaCroix.

His master reached his side, then squatted down next to him. He was dressed in a long, leather coat, wearing jeans and a shirt. His boots were polished to perfection. And his eyes were clear and cold.

Nick met that gaze, expecting to find death there. Surely, LaCroix must want him dead, destroyed. It would be right, since he'd risen against him, tried to destroy his master, *thought* he'd succeeded.

But if there was death inside those eyes, it was not intended for him. Rather, there was a sudden stillness, a silence of life. And Nick knew that his thoughts of LaCroix were not the only movements on the strings that bound them, that had brought him here this night.

"Janette—" he managed.

LaCroix nodded, once. Then he rose to his feet and turned, looking out to where the smoke still billowed into the air, from the burning Raven. The light of the fire lit the eastern sky. "Yes. I know." He looked over his shoulder and down. "I assume you're the cause of this. You always are."

Nick flinched, even though the comment was more observation than accusation. As he struggled upward to his knees and then his feet, he caught sight of Natalie. And he realized that he hadn't failed her, after all. "I want to ask you . . . a favor."

"A favor?" LaCroix raised an eyebrow, then looked back to the fire, hands clasped behind him. "The last time you asked me for something, and I gave it to you, you claimed that I tricked you. No. No, I don't think so, Nicholas."

"But . . . you must." He walked to LaCroix, placed a hand on his shoulder. When LaCroix met his gaze, stared at him, he removed his hand quickly, as if burned. "Please. You have to bring Nat across. I asked Janette, but there wasn't time—"

He couldn't finish the sentence, couldn't get past her name. But LaCroix half-smiled and nodded, as if he understood. He left the vantage point and walked back toward Natalie. "Do it yourself. You know how. You *do* don't you?"

Nick swallowed, then looked away. "I've tried, yes. But . . . they go mad. I can't control them."

"Small wonder, when you can't control yourself." Another observation. LaCroix lifted a finger to his lips and raised his head, looking down at Natalie. "No. I don't think so."

"I'll do anything, promise you anything. I'll follow you anywhere, do anything you ask, when you ask it." LaCroix looked at him in surprise and Nick dropped to his knees before him. "I'll swear fealty to you, again. I won't betray you, won't resist you. I'll become what you want me to be. If you save her. If you bring her across, let her be what she was."

Laughing, LaCroix walked by Nick, touching his shoulder briefly as he passed. "And this was all it would take? Complete surrender . . . for this?" He leaned against the wall and looked down at Natalie. "Perhaps my methods were wrong, at that. To have let you love . . . that would have been the answer. I was a fool not to see it."

Nick rose to his feet, wet his lips nervously. "You'll bring her across?"

"If only out of curiosity. You've fought me for eight-hundred years. I'm almost desperate to meet the woman for whom you're willing to give up everything." LaCroix's eyes grew cold and hard. "I'll hold you to your oath, Nicholas. I've worked at this too long not to. You've no reservations, knowing that?"

"Bring her across."

LaCroix shook his head, smiling again. "Remarkable." Then, sliding down the wall, he crouched beside Natalie. "Let's begin, then."

Nick stood where he was, not daring to move, to make a sound. It was shameful, this—letting Natalie become one of LaCroix's blood, giving her to LaCroix. But if it was the only way she'd come back to him, it would have to be done. And if she faulted him for what he'd given to LaCroix in exchange for her return to this world, he could live with that, too. As long as she was here. As long as she was still with him.

There was silence, the night shaken only by the distant sirens and sounds of chaos at the Raven. LaCroix seemed not to notice the background noise. He touched the side of Natalie's neck with the tips of his fingers, then frowned. He reached his hand to her face, feeling her cheek, touching her chin. Then his hand moved downward, to her heart.

Frowning, he looked up at Nicholas. "She's been shot through the heart."

He nodded. "Yes. From the back. The bullet . . . went through me."

LaCroix shook his head, then touched her cheek again. "I'm sorry, my dear," he said, kissing her cheek lightly, "but we're not destined to meet on this side, I'm afraid." Then, he rose and faced Nick. "It can't be done. If she'd been bitten, if you'd killed her . . . yes, there might be a chance. But she died the instant her heart stopped. There's no life in her—it's fled some hours since. I'm sorry, Nicholas. It's too late."

He stared, the words sinking in slowly. "No. You have to bring her across. You *promised*."

"And I'd very much like to, especially after your oath. I would have won through her. But now—?"

He shrugged, then leaned against the wall, head turned to watch the smoke from the fire. "She's as far from you as Janette. She's gone."

Nick flew at LaCroix, his hands going for the vampire's neck, to strangle him. "Liar!" he screamed. "Liar!"

Startled only for an instant, LaCroix pushed Nick back roughly, freeing himself. His eyes blazed gold and his smile was sharp and fanged. "Perhaps I've won after all. You've nothing left, have you Nicholas? Nothing . . . except me."

Nick stumbled back, his own eyes taking on a golden glow. He stared at LaCroix, enraged. "You *could* bring her back. You *can*. And if you won't—I'll kill you."

"Then you'll be alone." LaCroix took a step toward him and Nick backed away. "Is that what you want? Janette is dead. And now this woman? And you've killed others tonight. I smell human blood on you, on your breath." He advanced a few steps more, still smiling. "I *have* won, haven't I? You've killed and fed. There's still hope for you."

The beast was free within him. Nick saw the world go red, but he clenched his fists and stood his ground, as LaCroix approached. "Will you bring her back? Yes or no?"

LaCroix held out his open palms. "I told you, it's not possible. And even if I could . . . I'm not certain I would. Not *now*. I've won. I'm all you've got left. You'll follow me because you have no other choice. The story of what you've done tonight will spread like wildfire. The others will shun you. I wouldn't be surprised if the Enforcers might begin to look for you."

Not even the mention of the Enforcers could shake him. Nick steeled himself, ignored the words LaCroix spun around him like a web, to trap him. He waited for his answer.

Placing a hand on his shoulder, LaCroix gestured toward the fire, then walked around him. "If you had any real courage, you'd have stayed with Janette, would have burned in her place. Because you're too wild to let loose now, Nicholas. They'll destroy you, to protect the others. And the only one who can save you, is me." He leaned close, whispering in Nick's ear. "Ask me that, and I'll give it to you. Ask me to save you . . . and I will. For the same price you offered before. Absolute loyalty. Complete obedience. Let me make you into what you were meant to be, Nicholas."

He heard, but did not hear. And as he turned to LaCroix, and saw his eyes, he realized that LaCroix hadn't lied to him. LaCroix would give anything for what he offered. He simply couldn't give what Nick wanted. He *couldn't* bring back Natalie.

And if LaCroix couldn't do it . . . .

Ignoring his master, Nick walked back to Natalie. Kneeling down on the gravel covered rooftop, he took her in his arms, kissed her closed eyelids, her cold lips. He held her close. And he knew that he hadn't any answer left. Every avenue was closed to him. Even LaCroix, in returning from the dead, could not help her, could not help him.

There was a hand on his shoulder. He looked up at LaCroix.

And LaCroix released him, took a step back, as if alarmed. "You've lost your reason, haven't you?" He tried again, replacing his hand on Nick's shoulder. "No—no games today. I think you'd be more than happy to let me leave you here, to let you wander the world, engulfed in your own pain until you starve or the Enforcers find you."

"It's over," answered Nick. He tightened his grip on Natalie. "If you've any mercy, you'll kill me now. Have done with it. End the games. End the misery. Let me go."

A slight smile quirked around the edges of LaCroix's lips. His hand rose to Nick's face. With a flick of a finger, LaCroix brushed away a speck of blood that clung to his cheek. "Ah, but I couldn't do that, could

I? *I'd* be alone, then. Come, Nicholas. I'll save you. I'll set things right. Leave her and come away with me."

He buried his face in Natalie's hair, murmuring, "No."

"I can make you come with me. But . . . I don't want to push you further." There was steel in LaCroix's voice. "Come, Nicholas. Leave her. Come with me."

LaCroix's hand fell back to Nick's shoulder, tightened on it. And Nick felt something pull inside him, something strain and wrap itself around his senses and his brain. The command was an imperative, not to be ignored. At any other time, he'd have not been able to resist that hold on his mind and his being.

But his heart was still his own, and, broken as it was, it remained untouched by LaCroix's imperative. If anything, the beast within him raged against this intrusion, raged against the despair and anguish being pushed aside. He snarled and released Natalie. Before LaCroix could move, Nick turned and struck him, hard against the face.

He'd fell well on human blood tonight, the first time in a long time. The blow knocked LaCroix back, angered him enough so that his eyes turned red and burned brighter than the light of the fire from the Raven. He flew at Nick, knocking him back into the wall, hands raised to his throat, to choke him.

Despite the red of his eyes, Nick sensed that LaCroix was holding back—to subdue, *not* kill. But Nick had no such restraint or intention. Bringing his arms up between them, he broke LaCroix's hold on him and barreled toward him, pushing him back. As LaCroix staggered, Nick lowered his head and ran at him again, knocking him across the roof, toward the power box and building generator.

The thrum of the old unit was low and quiet, drowned out by their snarls and the echoes of the blows they exchanged. LaCroix grabbed Nick's arm, hurling him against the chicken wire and light wood that fenced in the unit. Nick took the construction to the ground with him, struggling up out of the wire that wrapped around him, unable to get his bearings. When his vision cleared, he saw LaCroix standing over him, a long piece of the wood in his hand, held like a spear.

But LaCroix didn't strike. He held the wood against Nick's chest, bearing down on it just enough to pin him in place—one move and the sharp stick would go through him, into his heart. He dared not even taken an unneeded breath.

"Now, will you come with me?" demanded LaCroix.

This was what he wanted—oblivion. Nick leaned back against the roof and the wire, letting his hands fall to his side. "Do it!" he hissed, through fangs and golden eyes. And, when LaCroix hesitated, the gold fading from his gaze and uncertainty replacing the look of anger and desperation, Nick moved upward, hoping to impale himself.

But LaCroix had sensed what he would do and dropped the wood. It clattered to the rooftop as LaCroix stepped back, staring at Nick, shaking his head. "You've gone mad," he whispered, as in disbelief. "You *have* gone mad."

It was as LaCroix turned away that Nick realized that this second request, one which was in LaCroix's power and could easily be accomplished, was going to be denied. Shredding the chicken wire as he rose, he ran at LaCroix, pushing him forward. The momentum carried LaCroix out of Nick's hands, into the generator.

There was a flash, and sparks, and fire, as the generator began to flare and flame. LaCroix stumbled away, engulfed by fire. His scream was that of the damned, so loud and clawing the Nick placed his hands over his ears, deafened by it. He froze, unable to quite comprehend why LaCroix was burning, how he could stop it, or why he should.

And then he realized that the burning was his answer. To touch LaCroix, to embrace him, would be to

burn himself. And that would end it. The stake and the fire, those were the ways to be rid of this hideous existence. Picking up the wooden spear from the ground, he stalked toward the place where LaCroix had fallen, was trying to extinguish the flames by rolling on the ground.

The skin was already blackened and the fire resisted the effort to smother it. There was still some sense left in LaCroix, despite the pain and the flames, there had to have been. For when he saw Nick approach him with the wooden stake, he fought his way to his knees, then to his feet. The evening breeze whipped the flames around him into full fury. He stared at Nick through that flicker, across the darkness and the distance that grew less with each step.

LaCroix took to the air. He flew. High and bright and wild, he rose upward, like a comet or shooting star, into the night sky. Nick stared, astounded, the flames growing stronger with each inch, each foot, the oxygen giving the fire substance, feeding it so that it burned red, then blue, then white hot around LaCroix. He moved to follow—

But that's when he realized that LaCroix was falling, plummeting downward. There was no control to this, no sense or logic. It was the fall of an inanimate object, a dead thing.

The pain of it hit him much as Janette's passing had done—a sharp knife between his ribs. But this time it was darker, deeper than before, tearing at him, setting him alight inside. As if a fist closed over it, the feeling was extinguished. And the dark, wide void inside him grew wider and darker and more still and cold than death itself.

Nick had fallen flat to the roof of the warehouse when the sensation hit him, when LaCroix had finally left the world. In wonderment, he shook his head—how could he have believed LaCroix was dead before, when he had felt nothing like this? With Richard, with Elizabeth, there had been sadness, yes. But they had not been with him as long, had not been so tied to him. He should have known it would be like this, LaCroix should have taught him, should have told him.

There were so many things LaCroix had never told him.

Like the limitations of bringing someone across, when they'd died from something other than the bite of a vampire.

Nick remained where he fell, sprawled on the gravel, for hours. His mind wandered over time and place, over things that he had done or not done or had done badly. But as hard as he tried, he could not think of one thing that he had yet to do. It was over. It was all over. He was alone, now. And, LaCroix had been right in that it would only be a matter of time before the Enforcers, or another of the vampires, destroyed him for his actions. There was no future. Only seconds, minutes, perhaps hours or even days. To exist.

Not to live. To exist.

It was that thought, and the thought of the passing hours, that finally forced him to his feet. Again, he brushed the gravel from him. And, again, he returned to Natalie.

Her body had begun to stiffen and had the stench of dead meat about it, but he sat beside her, his back against the brick and wooden wall, and held her in his arms. Stroking her hair, he talked to her. Spoke of the life they might have had, if she'd found a cure for him, if he'd become mortal again. Of the children that might have been born of love and lived and grown, in sunshine. Of the time they might have spent, in mortal pastimes of painting picket fences and cutting lawns and planting flowers. Of the years that would have passed, as naturally as all things did and do, until the end would come for them.

Nick talked to her of all these things, talked to her until his throat grew dry and sound no longer passed his lips. Then he thought what he could not say, knowing that she would hear him. For, as the first rays of sunlight warmed his skin, in the instant before the burning started, he could still see. The beauty

of it, the sheer grace of the light, led him to hope that a God who had created such a thing would have mercy enough not to damn him both in this world, and the next. That hope, and the possibility that he might yet speak those words aloud to Natalie and have her respond, filled him with such light—

That the burning was not so bad as he could possibly have imagined.

Indeed, it was worse.

Night